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Franco Ruffini: When Actors Dream of Living on Finding – Excerpt from E. Barba and N. Savarese’s New Book • “This Is by No Means a Passive, Enervated Generation” – Interview with Attila Vidnyánszky on *The Tragedy* Performance of the International Madách Project • Judit Ungvári: Harmony of Diversity and Unity – Scenes from MITEM 9 • Yuri M. Lotman: The House in *The Master and Margarita* • Márton P. Gulyás: Shrinking Spaces. New Mediality in *Woyzeck* at the National Theatre in Budapest • Theatre of the Nation – Conversation with Attila Vidnyánszky by Zsolt Szász • Essays by Géza Balogh, Gabriella Lőrincz P., István Kornya and István Bessenyei Gedő on the 30-year-old theatre in Berehove

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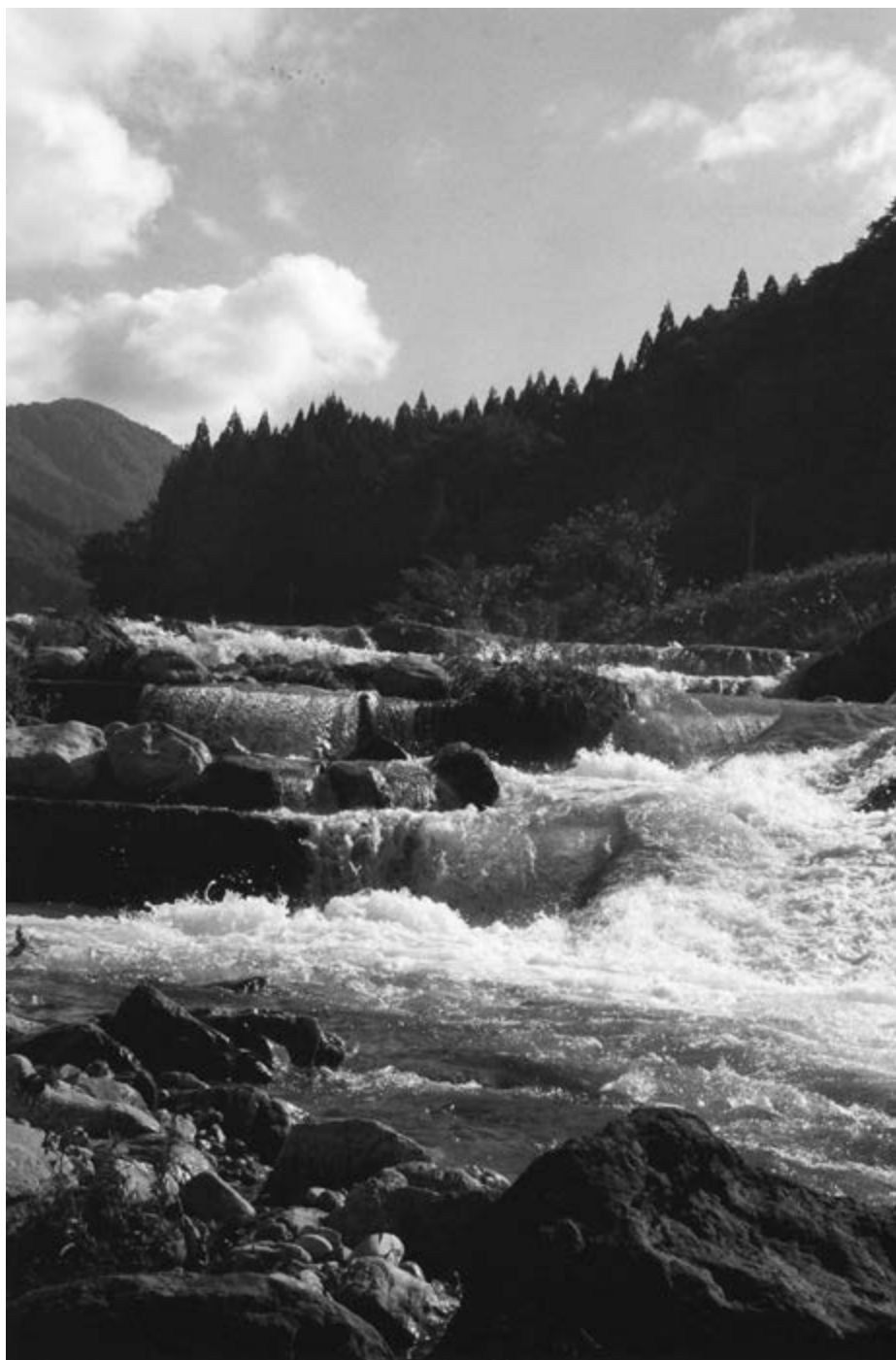
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The Kamimomose River near Toga Mura
(source: *Culture is the Body*. The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki, 2015)

From Text To Stage^{*}

(extract)

Words in theatre are ultimately spoken (be they previously written or coined in a moment of improvisation), and it is through the seductive, dramatic quality of the speech act that we encounter the theatre's singular essence. In other words, it is not the content of an actor's text, per se, but the formal quality of the speech act itself that inspires the audience. Thus, if we view theatre in terms of the relationship between actor and text, it follows that the theatre's defining characteristic is revealed through the spontaneous sensations experienced in the actor's speaking body, which in turn spawn an imaginative reincarnation of the rich linguistic heritage that dwells within the collective somatic unconscious of all human beings. (...)

The Actor's "Cozening" Theatre begins when a person projects his or her voice in space to tell a story – be it through great drama, poetry or even improvisation – and those watching find value in that person's energy/action and are seduced by it. This is when the act of storytelling becomes a kind of deceit, what I like to call "cozening." This cozening does not occur through the intellectual interpretation of a text, but rather when the act of speaking itself becomes the drama – when the change that happens inside the speaker reveals itself. This transformation is what we refer to as acting. More specifically, the power to cozen emerges when an actor's appealing use of language and space, action and energy, generates an extraordinary, constantly shifting visceral awareness between him or herself and the audience. We usually refer to this as an actor's presence. When this presence is vivid, we in the audience experience a physical and spiritual satisfaction different from our daily lives, beguiled by the actor's ability to conjure up this sensation in us. This is why the source of a truly great actor's charisma is not found in the text, but rather in the subconsciously driven speaking of the text, which transfigures the actor into his or her greatest potential self.

This essential, singular self, lying dormant in everyday life, is ignited through the act of speech – a kind of fictional truth. By activating his or her charisma through this fictional truth, the actor elevates the audience into a rare atmosphere beyond quotidian reality. At such moments, the actor's cozening produces a dense space where the seer and the seen, at first structurally separated and estranged, coalesce into one. The instant this fusion of actor and audience is achieved, theatre is born.

^{*} *Culture is the Body. The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki*, New York, 2015, Chapter 1.

ARTS, CREATIVITIES, AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

The Five Continents of Theatre

Facts and Legends about the Material
Culture of the Actor

Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese



BRILL | SENSE

The cover of the book titled *The Five Continents of Theatre*, Brill NV, Leiden, 2019



FRANCO RUFFINI

When Actors Dream of Living on Funding^{*}

Thinking theatre today – *Thinking theatre* means thinking about it in terms of the present. Theatre cannot be reduced to any of its components (actor, set, text, directing) nor to all of these together. It is an organism and as such should be considered in its wholeness. It is possible to study one or more of its individual components, but it is convenient to think of it as articulated in levels, from the most evident to the most hidden. Each level of organisation intersects transversally with all the components of theatre. The evident levels are those correlated to the forms in which theatre manifests itself, from its ideology to its aesthetics. Hidden levels are economic, sociological and anthropological.

The fundamental level for the functioning of theatre is the most concealed one, in which the relation between theatre and performance is defined. Thinking theatre means asking questions about this relationship. In order not to automatically presume that theatre and performance are identical (theatre coincides with performance) or implicit to one another (the performance is implicit in theatre), it is necessary to assume the perspective that the two terms are autonomous with respect to one another. It is said that the advent of cinema pushed theatre to the margins, but cinema did not “marginalise” theatre; rather it amputated theatre from the market for spectacle, rendering theatre no longer competitive compared to film. The awareness of this fact is the experience of the present and marks the crisis of twentieth-century theatre.

The distinction between theatre and performance is the objective reality of the twentieth century. The performance is the social and commercial element of theatre. The amputation of the market of the spectacle separates theatre from its component or product (the performance) without counterpoising one against

^{*} Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese: *The Five Centuries of Theatre*, Chapter 1, pp. 84–87.

the other. The fact that the distinction between theatre and performance is the objective reality of the twentieth century does not mean that all theatre people were or are aware of this.

The market – The word market must not be taken to mean simply the situation of buying and selling performances. The performance market is much more than the context and economic guarantee of theatre. It is the motor of its existential, productive, organisational and creative dynamics. Such it was at the beginning of the twentieth century, during the moment of utmost significance of professional companies, which were businesses, true firms that shared not only an economic practice but also a culture of their own. Before this, thinking theatre might have coincided with thinking performance. Afterwards, thinking theatre became autonomous with respect to thinking performance. In the case of directing, for example, many books still continue to approach the matter as a continuation of nineteenth-century stage production, or in terms of the strategies employed to overcome the amputation of the performance market. This is the case of the subsidies that continue to be perceived by theatre people as a natural evolution of the marketing of tickets based on the law of supply and demand.

In his *Manifesto of the Third Theatre* (1976), Eugenio Barba proposed to consider, alongside officially-recognised or majoritarian theatre (the first theatre) and avant-garde theatre (the second theatre), also a “third” theatre, defined in negative relation to the others, as neither the first nor the second. Many have seen in that text a classification of theatre depending on aesthetics and poetics, or simply as a comprehensive opposition between aesthetics and poetics on one hand, and ethics on the other. Each of these interpretations contains an element of truth. But the heart of Barba’s *Manifesto* is elsewhere: in having distinguished a theatre – the first and the second – which lives in continuity with the past, and uncritically accepts an idea of “natural evolution”; and another type of theatre – the third – which lives in discontinuity with the past. Let us think theatre, therefore, assuming the amputation of the performance market as a sort of origin from which we must consider the facts that take place in the present or happened in the past. In the present, the reaction to the decline of the performance market has been, and is, the creation of a substitute market with respect to the buying and selling of the product “performance”. What follows here are some of the most common strategies.

Funding – The term funding refers here to different realities: the specific phenomenon of financial support to theatre by the state or by public institutions, and the various approaches to substitute the paying audience with other sources of financing on the basis of criteria which are not exclusively those of the enjoyment of a performance. Not enough studies have been devoted to the fact that the first leaders of “theatre without (the market of) performance” were for the most part amateurs, each in his own way (Antoine,

Copeau, Appia, Craig, Stanislavski), just to mention the early decades of the twentieth century. Amateurs have a propensity and the habit to conceive theatre without a performance market. The amputation of the market, while it undermines professional theatre, was to a certain degree compatible with theatre by amateurs, especially when they were wealthy. The Moscow Art Theatre, founded by Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1898, stressed the restoration of the dignity of the actor. It was imperative that an actor have the use of a heated dressing room with a samovar and books, and not have to submit to the crushing rhythm of touring. But a component of equal if not greater importance was patronage. Without the money of the industrialist Sawa Morozov, the Art Theatre would have been inconceivable and could not have lasted. Stanislavski was able to focus on quality – and thus on the dignity of the actor – because he was a wealthy amateur. This fact should not, however, diminish the influence of his vocation and ethical principles.

The market expands – The expansion of the theatrical market means building a market in which the performance is on offer alongside other offerings. It is not the individual offer that is in action, but that of all the offerings together. The performance comes to be grafted into a broad selection of other “products” which together make it possible to do theatre in the absence of a performance market. For many so-called group theatres, the production of performances is only one of many activities, along with seminars, training workshops, residencies



The striking titles of the moving pictures that attracted spectators to the first cinematographic projections at fairs and pushed theatre out of the market for spectacle

by other artists, editorial projects and cultural initiatives that may appear distant from theatre. Think, for example, of the Peruvian Yuyachkani, Italy's Teatro Tascabile, Spain's Atalaya, Ecuador's Contraelviento, the Argentinian Comuna Baires or El Baldio, not to mention the Danish Odin Teatret which has been a pioneer since 1964. The expansion of the market appears as an enlargement of the borders of theatre itself. The additional cultural activities are not intended as a means of financing the production of performances, but as another component of theatre, different from but not extraneous to the performance component. The expansion of the market shows that the performance is not the theatre's only product. It demonstrates its variety to those disposed to see it and creatively utilises its implications. For the others, it appears to be merely a marketing tactic.

Spectators outside the market – Alongside the spectators who consume only the performance itself, there are always spectators outside the market. In addition to the performance product, these people are interested in the aspects of the process that leads to the performance, including those that call for direct participation. For these spectators, the performance is the concluding moment in a long and varied activity of participation in the theatrical work. The offering of workshops, works-in-progress and other forms of encounter, in addition to broadening the market, amplifies the number and quality of the spectators outside the market, who consume the performance after following the process that precedes it. From this materialist perspective, rather than as a mystical communitarian experience, should be seen the project of Stanislavski and L. Sulerzhitski (director, assigned by Stanislavski, of the First Studio, founded in 1912) to build a theatre laboratory at Evpatorija, an isolated location on the Black Sea. In this location, invited spectators would live and work with the actors for a few days before concluding their experience by watching the performance.

Opus/Group – The superficial similarity of theatre and cinema under the tag "collective arts" seems to legitimate the following syllogism: cinema gathers a group of specialists to create its opus. Theatre is like cinema: therefore a group is formed in theatre in order to create an opus, while an opus is not created in order to allow a group to form and, once formed, to continue to exist.

Experience shows that despite superficial resemblances, the opus/group relation in theatre is the exact opposite of that of cinema. In theatre, the group has priority over the opus. Past and present, the history of theatre is not one of opus, but of individuals and groups. These may often be in conflict with the logic of the opus, which, if it permits survival, forces the group to submit to the laws of the market.

Craft/Art – The market needs above all to guarantee a certain level of quality in its products, and thus it depends on craft. But even as it depends on craft, it tends to devalue it, because craft appears to be the enemy of art. The



The march in the desert to the archaeological site of Cajamarquilla, Peru, which opened the performance without spectators in honour of Jerzy Grotowski. Theatre groups from around the world participated during the Reencuentro Ayacucho, 1998, organised by Mario Delgado and his group Cuatrotablas from Lima



Eugenio Barba, Mario Delgado, and the participants of the event in the same place
(source: Odin Teatre archive)

theatre of the past, seen through the conditioning lens of the market, shows a relation of opposition between craft and art. In the absence of a market, the dependence on craft lessens, and thanks to this attenuation the necessity and power of art emerge. The apparent opposition of one against the other is a struggle. What counts is not the outcome, but the rules and dynamics of the struggle. In the early Twenties in Paris, Charles Dullin taught his students at the Atelier Theatre the sophisticated techniques of Japanese actors, but also the craft of actors in the melodramas. Meyerhold did the same during the same era concerning the skills of the travelling players performing in the fairs (*balagan*, see p. 102). The reference points for Meyerhold's "actor of the future" were the art of Eleonora Duse and the "popular" craft of an actor such as Giovanni Grasso. Art and craft are not terms that exclude one another; rather, in their struggle they add life to one another.

Convention/Tradition – The performance market took advantage of specialisations that guaranteed rapid production and a relatively high-quality product. Therefore, when the performance market is flourishing, tradition tends to flatten out, to the point of becoming the collection of conventions that regulate the creation and sale of its particular products. In the absence of a market, it turns out that what is conventional is only the first level of tradition, that of forms. By breaking the chain of conventions, the absence of a market liberates other levels of tradition: that of the *principles* (beyond forms) and of *value* (beyond principles and forms). Deprived of a market that imposed a particular tradition, twentieth-century theatre people "in crisis" began to seek another tradition in that "warehouse of the new" (Cru-ciani, 1992) which is the *past* and the *elsewhere*. It could be Commedia dell'Arte, Asian theatre, ancient Greece, ritual, circus, or cabaret, to which figures such as Craig, Copeau, Artaud and Brecht all turned. Shifting from one tradition to another became possible and quite normal. If practiced with rigour and passion, eclecticism flows into syncretism, in which the diverse forms of traditions dialogue on the basis of common principles. The plurality of traditions that theatre people without a (performance) market draw upon with ease is astounding. But it is surprising only when one does not perceive the level of pre-expressive principles (theatre anthropology) at which the difference between forms becomes irrelevant. Meyerhold's bio-mechanics and Eisenstein's "expressive movement" are nothing more than the level of the technical principles where kabuki, Commedia dell'Arte, Stanislavski's sense-memory (*perezhivame*), and the rhythms of Jacques-Dalcroze converge.

Value – Beyond the level of technical principles, rigorous, passionate labour in tradition can reach yet another level, in which the dialogue between traditions integrates with a dialogue with oneself – a "work on oneself". This is the answer to a challenge no longer about the *how* but about the *why* of doing theatre. This is the level of value.

Value is the true and ultimate problem of the theatre of the twentieth century. Grotowski's journey from the creation of performances to art as a "vehicle" illustrates the passage from form to principles to value in tradition. The guides of the present into the past are those anomalous (or exceptional) masters who, from Craig to Grotowski, lived the amputation of the performance market as a new possibility, entrusting their theatrical practice to visions without performance. Artaud arrived at the level of value by renouncing performance more or less deliberately and burning bridges with the levels of form and principles. His way of doing theatre was immediately about making the value of theatre a bigger problem than theatre: a problem of life.

At the beginning is the awareness of the present. The priority of the group over the opus in the present lets us rediscover the same phenomenon in the past. Reciprocally, the awareness of a history of theatre as a history of people and groups, rather than a history of opus instructs us for the present and future. The re-examination of the past bestows greater consistency on the application of the craft to artistic ends. The value of theatre is not an invention of the twentieth century. But the amputation of the performance market freed theatre toward open, conscious experience, and prods artists to seek value even where experience remains a secret to those living through it. For those who live the crisis creatively, this is the theatre of the twentieth century: a reinvention of the past as a foundation of the present and a project for the future. Reinventing the past has meant the conquest of our own history.



Final scene of Brecht's *Mother Courage* by Seville's Teatro Atalaya, on tour in Madrid, 2015



The head of the Dionysus statue, marble, 81 cm, 1st century, 100-125, Smyrna (source: rmo.nl)



ATTILA VÉGH

Dionysus Infusion

The *Bacchae* Directed by Theodoros Terzopoulos

“How many times do I die if I feel for everything?” – exclaims Pessoa of *The Book of Disquiet*. What is this? Feeling for everything? Who could be capable of it? And, after all, who would want such a thing?

I will tell you: the poet. The poet feels what it would be like to exhaust oneself (or, to put it more dramatically, to fill the void which their birth opened in the world) if they were to feel for everyone and everything. If, by keeping their openness (which, I suspect, is identical with the human essence, provided there is such a thing at all) perpetually awake, they allow the stream of life’s experiences to flow through them with such a high degree of – occasionally frenzied – sensitivity as only a poet is capable of doing. It is at this point that they can come into such a hot existential proximity with the world, with being, namely with the very object (and now the subject as well) of their poetry, that they can already step into its existing contours, wrapping around themselves (and now around the world) the coat of their individual existence, only to prevent the cooling of that which is felt.

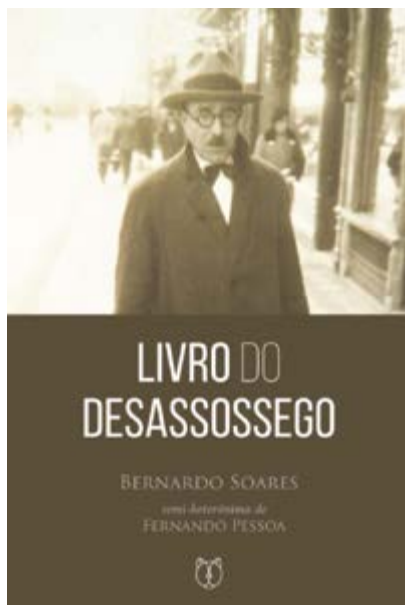
The silence hidden in the maddening closeness of all-encompassing empathy only waits for the spirit of poetry to start singing. You cannot tell when and how it will sound, nor from how far away. The only certainty is that the melody softens over time. For the soul, now having ventured out into the world, must go to the farthest edges, gazing back upon the subject of its poetry. The emotion is blazing hot – the writing icy cold. This is how true poetic work is born.

But please, let us not look at this heatmap dialectically. Here, fire and ice are homes to each other. Therefore there is no need for any Hegelian schema or any act of *aufheben* for the poetic deed to come about. Quite the opposite. Let us rather, following Martin Heidegger’s advice, try to see it in the Greek manner. Let us not tear the world into opposing details, only to later dialectically unite them – if we are clever enough – into some “higher” unity. Let us feel it, let

us think of it as it is. The daylight of dichotomy, dialectic, logic, moral yes-no, burns the colours of the world out, and its night engulfs them. Let us find some dim illumination instead. Plato's cave suits the purpose perfectly.

It is not coincidental that we found refuge in the hollow from which the Socratic spirit of Plato let escape one by one the assembly of men whom it found wise, so that they investigate – in the daylight of philosophical history – the vacant space left by what the cave embers had been keeping warm. Those who want to collect themselves during the great scattering do not make a mistake if they spend time reposeing in the chamber of prehistoric people.

As I enter, the smell of smoke hits me. The ashes of extinguished fires pile up in the dim light. The cave is deserted; everyone has fled to the light. I am alone. This is a good place for contemplation. I sit down, leaning against the damp limestone wall. I take a deep breath of the smoke. My lungs are filled with a



familiar bitterness. Childhood vacations, the old lake Balaton, Pest at night during the 90s, the world which has vanished altogether, the two or three worlds which have vanished altogether during my lifetime. Because a world is annihilated roughly every twenty years nowadays. The seductive smoke.

The last image I see half-asleep is a packed event in a Lisbon garden, attended by Fernando Pessoa's friends who have gathered to celebrate his birthday. The poet eventually emerges from the noisy crowd, pulls out a revolver, and shoots himself in the mouth in front of the audience. He sprawls on the grass, blood trickling from the back of his head.

Dionysus torn asunder. This is already the realm of dreams. The god of Nysa gazes into the black mirror of blood. On the congealing lake, pieces of Pessoa's face come together. The god from the East, who ultimately scaled Olympus through human hearts. The mirror-face dons a skin, and Dionysus nods. He knows he is the last one of the gods. He, who feels for everyone. (Perhaps this exactly makes him the sole survivor.) The mask of tragedy is his visage. He knows that a single poet is not enough for this face to be formed for ever in the mirror of the spirit. Many more are needed: Nietzsche, Rilke, Ady, Heidegger, Kosztolányi, Tamás Cseh, and the others. There will be many more bacchants, narthex-bearers and maenads. They are the ones who experience, affirm, accept, and proclaim the fullness of life, feeling for everything, dying a thousand deaths, beyond all morals which

new gods impose on their followers. They are the ones who are infinitely free, and therefore their ecstasy is not self-loss like in the lives of those enslaved by power, possession, or drugs, because stepping out of themselves they do not enter the isolated and lonely realms of ecstasy, but the sacred clearing of the orgy: they find each other. This is the festive space of Dionysus: everyone feels for everyone here.

A hundred worlds have passed since Dionysus appeared in Hellas. We can only conjecture about – when much later Olympus opened up to him and the earthly god took his rightful place among his celestial companions on the mountain – what the Greeks thought of him and how they felt when someone uttered the name of the god of joy. Now I want to talk about what he means to us today. What he means to me.

Of course, Nietzsche is the main culprit in this. Seeing through the realms of bygone worlds, he discovered Dionysus' Apollo and Apollo's Dionysus, the divine pair who coexist in the spirit of art and tragedy. Not the way as many believed, misunderstanding Nietzsche. (And not the way as Nietzsche, according to a later admission, himself had believed, misunderstanding his own self.) They are not the prominent figures of two opposing principles leading a battle against each other within the work of art. Because the world does not unravel from the struggle of opposing forces. It is a diversely unified field where Apollo and Dionysus are not the constipatedly suffering managers of a dichotomous world which they are groaning into a dialectic unity, whose "no-s" against each other finally settle in a mosaic "yes", but they are figures approaching the dizzying and inseparable "yes" of the beauty and horror of existence from multiple directions. This divine "primal yes" has never been understood by reason, logic, dialectics, or metaphysics. According to Nietzsche, Hegel's philosophy screams an abstract proposition of contradiction, replacing action with reaction, which is nothing more than the action of a slave. The resentment, thirst for revenge and irritation typical of the mob can never comprehend anything original because it is inherently reactive. Christianity, metaphysics, and any belief that sees the world as dualistic are deeply resentful towards this world, in which we are compelled to live, experience, and think. Tragedy – and its progenitor, Dionysus – will never be understood by the slave, Nietzsche says.

Dialectics, of course, offers a kind of conception of tragedy: "it ties tragedy to the negative, to opposition, to contradiction," writes Gilles Deleuze in his book on Nietzsche. The dialectical understanding of Greek tragedy suggests that Dionysus is the thesis, Apollo the antithesis, and from their opposition emerges the end result which is eliminated and elevated: their alliance. This is generally how we understand it, perhaps because we cannot see it otherwise than dialectically. Nietzsche's intention for us to go beyond this has dichotomous roots, and it may seem an illusion from our perspective which has been educated by Socrates, Jesus and Hegel. And what is more, it is possible that the Greeks

themselves were not capable of seeing the world of opposing elements in such a primordial unity either.

This is how one thinks until they attend a performance by Theodoros Terzopoulos. But let us not jump so far ahead.

*

Euripides' last tragedy, *The Bacchae*, has been interpreted by many researchers as an old age confession. They suggest that the rational-minded playwright, who had criticized theism so much, returned to the religion of his ancestors at the end of his life, repenting for his youthful sins and seeking forgiveness from Olympus. It is problematic from the outset to label as rationalist or atheist a tragedian who lived two and a half thousand years ago. It is anachronistic hubris. But even if it were true that Euripides no longer believed in the gods and indeed committed a cultural-historical sin of existence by, as Nietzsche reproaches him, allowing the audience onto the stage, thus puncturing the spirit of tragedy, through which leak the world of the *okhlos*, the mob subsequently seeps in and floods the cargo bay – even then, it is not certain that with *The Bacchae* he is questioning his entire oeuvre, cheating on his former self. But since a certain turning point can indeed be depicted, the question arises: did not the wise Euripides realize in his final days that instead of the countless gods guarding over the field of human existence, there is only one that we must follow, and that is none other than Dionysus? Could it be that the world fragmented into the jurisdictions of myriad specialized deities is still one and indivisible, and the guardian of this indivisibility is the god of Nysa himself?

If this is the case, then Nietzsche's judgment on Euripides might need at least some additions. But instead of anticipating anything, let us now immerse ourselves in the misty forest of Dionysus.

It is the time of the Great Dionysia. Maenads ascend the mountain to merge in the orgy. They come with great commotion, they can be heard from afar. They are dressed in spotted deer skins (perhaps the skin of a fallow deer) and leopard fur. As they arrive at the clearing, the ritual begins.

In the darkness of instinct, souls merge, and the community reveals itself with a force which illuminates weekdays, much as Zeus did to Semele. The boundaries of individual existence melt away, and the enraptured crowd surrenders to the common inner fire. Dionysian Bacchants cast off their quotidian selves to unite as one. Anyone can enter this fire, provided they are capable of seeing the wonder within it. Anyone with a sense of wonder. Anyone who dares to remain childlike enough not to be hopelessly bound by the rules of society. Those in whom Dionysus feels the sensitivity are the invited ones. All covered in animal skins, since they are summoned by nature now. Marching beneath the fur with speckled rosettes, their individual outlines dissolve.

It is winter, and it has been snowing on Mount Parnassus for days. (Once a rescue expedition had to be sent for the snow-covered thiasoi. By the time they were found, their clothes had frozen stiff.) The outlines of the Maenads walking in their speckled animal skins are further dissolved by the drizzling whiteness. Higher and higher on the mountain, deeper and deeper within themselves.

In *The Bacchae*, the revelers do not march to Mount Parnassus, the site of the Great Dionysia, but to the mountain of Cithaeron, where the snow never melts. This icy, relentless, dazzling environment serves as the backdrop for the rapture. The intense Dionysian force, which finds elemental expression in madness, is abundantly present through the contrasting background of winter, says Károly Kerényi, who, quoting Ottó F. Walter in his Dionysian essay, speaks about the stirring of life's profound, death-ridden depths. He perceives this as the essence of Dionysian mania.

However, the mortal protagonist of *The Bacchae*, Pentheus, is so rational that he cannot experience mania or ecstasy. He cannot surrender to wonder and awe. He can only manage curiosity. Curiosity is nothing more than ontologically emptied wonder and awe. A curious person does not seek to see with their soul; they merely want to feed their eyes. They chase what is interesting, ephemeral reality, which, however, loses its interest on satisfaction, urging people to seek new momentary curiosities. (Our contemporary tabloids and online newspapers are the offspring and nurturers of this superficial curiosity.)

The unbelieving king is punished by Dionysus in multiple ways. First of all, a laughing stock is made of him. Pentheus, intrigued by curiosity, attempts to spy on the actions of the Maenads. For the Greeks, a man dressed in women's clothing was an object of contempt. Pentheus does exactly this, hoping to pass unnoticed among the Maenads. The ultimate punishment is death: Dionysus tears the proud ruler apart with the help of his own mother. Thus, the mother is also punished for bringing such a creature into the world.

But let us return to the beginning of the tragedy. After Dionysus's monologue, the chorus speaks: the Bacchantes herald the festival while praising the god. Two friends join the procession: Teiresias and the old king Cadmus, who relinquished his power for the sake of his grandson, Pentheus. The king asks the blind seer: "Of all the city are we the only ones who'll dance to honour Bacchus?" Teiresias' self-assured response in the original text goes like this: "monon gar eu phronumen, hoi d' alloi kakósz", in English: "Yes, indeed, for we're the only ones whose minds are clear."¹ The literal translation of the text sounds something like: "For we alone are in our right minds, the rest are mad."

The fact that Teiresias uses here the verb "phroneó" will gain in significance later on. In his conversation with Cadmus, the different modes of cognitive

¹ [<https://genius.com/Euripides-the-bacchae-scene-i-and-choral-interlude-i-annotated>]

activity will be sharply distinct, thereby indicating to the audience the kind of thinking required to understand Dionysus and feel that his festival is important. A few lines later, Teiresias speaks like this:

“...uden szophizomesztha toisz daimoszin. Patriusz paradokhasz, hasz th’ homélikasz khronó kektémeth’, udeisz auta katabalei logosz, ud’ ei di’ akrón to szophon héurétai phrenón.” (“To the gods we mortals are all ignorant. Those old traditions from our ancestors, the ones we’ve had as long as time itself, no argument will ever overthrow, in spite of subtleties sharp minds invent.”)²

In János Csengeri’s Hungarian translation, the distinction between the two modes of cognitive activity, namely being sensible and philosophizing, are not clear here at the start. Unfortunately, Csengeri continues to disregard the difference between phrén and nous, which Euripides consistently emphasizes. For example, when Pentheus, who denies Dionysus and has a rational mentality, steps forward to argue against his grandfather’s actions, he misses the reason which he calls nous in Cadmus’ deed. On the other hand, Teiresias in his response lacks the reason which is referred to as phrén in Pentheus’s pedantic argument:

“...en toisz logoioi d’ uk eneisz szoi phrenesz.” (“...your words don’t make any sense at all.”)³

Csengeri’s Hungarian translation differentiates between nous as reason and phrén by translating the latter to correct reason. A few lines later, however, the reappearing phrén is already translated to wisdom. Thus, the various modes of cognitive activity competing with one another in the piece turn somewhat blurred in the translation. Nous, characteristic of Pentheus’ thinking, denotes the rational, compliant, everyday reason, while phrén represents thinking which is passionate, receptive to wonders and capable of understanding them:

“...mé to kratosz aukhei dünamin anthrópoisz ekhein, méd’ én dokész men, hé de doxa szu noszé, phronein dokei ti.” (“Don’t be too confident a sovereign’s force controls men. If something seems right to you, but your mind’s diseased, don’t think that’s wisdom.”)⁴

In ancient Greek thought, philosophers considered opinion (doxa) to be the lowest form of knowledge. In the pyramid of cognition, above this stood the intellect (dianoia), and at the pinnacle was reason (nous). However, as we have seen, nous is incapable of approaching Dionysus. Only phrén, passionate thinking, heartfelt reason, is capable of that. The text of the chorus that concludes the debate refers to this reason as phronésis. The

² [<https://genius.com/Euripides-the-bacchae-scene-i-and-choral-interlude-i-annotated>]

³ [<https://genius.com/Euripides-the-bacchae-scene-i-and-choral-interlude-i-annotated>]

⁴ [<https://genius.com/Euripides-the-bacchae-scene-i-and-choral-interlude-i-annotated>]

etymological connection between the noun *phrén*, the verb *phroneó* and the noun *phronésis* is evident.

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Dionysus is merciless with his enemies, but he rewards abundantly those who love him. His followers can only be those capable of similar recklessness and such wild frenzy as the sober world perceives as madness. The king of the sober-minded is Pentheus.

Pentheus' main arguments against women following the cult of Dionysus are as follows: they leave their homes; worship a newly emerged god; and engage in revelry while intoxicated. Pentheus stands on the grounds of social order, tradition, and morality. This is roughly the duty of a king. However, the new cult denies the carefully devised social order, *nomos*, precisely because it aims to immerse its believers in *physis*, the deepest core of existence. Pentheus is clever, but not wise enough to dismiss this cleverness to hell when the time comes. The cheerfulness of logic, the daylight of morality, is a veil that conceals the sweet terror of existence. The *deinos*, the dreadful, must be hidden because the era of decline, of weakening, has already lost its connection to the springs of existence, and the waters of memory would mean death for the weakened organism.

In the exultation of ecstasy, the voices of suffering are mixed. In Eleusis, where the figure of Dionysus became intertwined with the Demeter Mysteries and where it was believed he was the son of Zeus and Demeter, the god of ecstasy is called *iakkhos*. This word signifies shouting and wailing. The god of wailing appears, and his devotees, the *bacchants* and *bacchae*, begin to make noise, play music, and rave in their ecstasy. This is their way of enduring the drama of creation, the manifestation of chthonic forces, the overflowing of existence. This is an apocalypse, a revelation, where the foundation of human life, the delight and terror of existence, is revealed in its full power and organic unity.

The Dionysian insanity is not the simple madness which exiles a person to the lowest realms of their destiny. Pentheus' chief misunderstanding lies in this. He cannot comprehend the existential truth which Plato speaks of in *Phaedrus*. Thus, he must perish: "...there is also a madness which is a divine gift, and the source of the chiefest blessings granted to men [...] The third kind is the madness of those who are possessed by the Muses; which taking hold of a delicate and virgin soul, and there inspiring frenzy, awakens lyrical and all other numbers; with these adorning the myriad actions of ancient heroes for the instruction of posterity. But he who, having no touch of the Muses' madness in his soul, comes to the door and thinks that he will get into the temple by the help of art—he, I say, and his poetry are not admitted [...] And we, on our part,

will prove in answer to him that the madness of love is the greatest of heaven's blessings, and the proof shall be one which the wise will receive, and the witling disbelieve." ⁵

The metaphysical sensitivity of the Greek Golden Age is not expressed in morality, but in art, and not in ethical deeds, but in tragedy. The atmosphere of another world, beyond the human one, breaks into the world of the drama's heroes. It trembles from there, beyond, and billows forth from the divine darkness beyond morality. It erupts in the form of the boundless, the incomprehensible, the horrifying, in the terrible deeds of the gods, Dionysus' horrendous and mad will, so that the divine can free itself "from the wretchedness of superfluity" through this overflowing, with its dregs to be consumed by humanity. However, in the world of Dionysus pleasure is just as torturous as torture is pleasurable. The person enthralled by his spell becomes aware of the wonder of existence, affirming the one and indivisible world at the orgy of cultic unity with his fellow human beings he steps out of himself, sheds his idiot mask, and transforms into an overman amidst the glowing atmosphere of the forest, the unity of nature. "The Dionysian human being's eyes are plunged into the view of nature's unveiled and immeasurably vast workings with magnificent ecstasy; the ancient archetype of man has blown away the illusion of culture, and the true human has appeared, the bearded satyr who rejoices in his god. Alongside him, the cultured human has shrunk into a deceitful caricature," says Nietzsche. Those who attend a Terzopoulos performance (I promise you will not have to wait long for this) and are sensitive enough to transformation might experience that while a cultured human enters the theatre, a creature of instinct will be applauding at the end.

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Over the course of two and a half millennia, it has transpired several times that Dionysus can be denied in many forms. You may convince yourself that you are an incredibly civilized being, thus the deep mists of instinct from your soul have long evaporated through a consciously directed reverse inhalation, pumping everything redundant within us for our success into the universe, that is, the trash bin of the infinite. It is no accident that the Dionysus-denying, hyper-correct inhabitants of our era are oriented towards success. After all, we call it success when a person sees tiny mirrors reflected in the eyes of others and preens themselves in those mirrors until everyone mutually becomes satisfied with the grand, shared spectacle of a sterile, self-sufficient life. ("Shared" might be misleading to write here. Because from these individual blinks, the mythical meadow travelled by butterflies will never formulate around us, a meadow

⁵ https://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Phil%20281b/Philosophy%20of%20Magic/Arcana/Neoplatonism/p71phs/phaedrus%20selections.html

which, blinking millions of wonders around us, sees us as the middle of the world in the most natural manner possible.)

You may also deny the god of Nysa by saying: not only am I a conscious being, but independent as well, so do not come to me with ideas of community, people or nation. These do not exist, because in reality, only the individual exists. Everything else is just conceptual imagination. Society is made up of individuals, so we should concern ourselves exclusively with making individuals feel good. This is the ultimate and only meaning of community existence.

Ultimately, you may deny him by underrating ecstasy. This is particularly dangerous when someone fancies themselves an artist. Without ecstasy, obsession, an inexplicable fervour which heats dreams to a creative degree, there is no art. (Let it not deceive us when examining the achievements of our artistic life that we generally find no artwork. The fact that the overwhelming majority of artists are not truly artists in the sociological sense does not degrade our ontological-aesthetic statement.)

From the aforementioned cloud of denial, Dionysus now emerges as someone we already know well. He is the orgiastic, earthly god of nature, the instinctual realm, collective fusion and ecstasy, eventually embraced by his Olympian colleagues, but not subject to orders of any kind. He is the master in the depth of our soul.

Anyone who denies Dionysus denies their own soul, and the punishment is proportionate to this denial: the retaliation strikes as deeply as the offender's hubris. Those who deny everything will eventually be torn asunder by raging maenads, such is the course of events. This is also what happens in *The Bacchae*, or even more. Anyone torn asunder by their own mother in her visionary frenzy has their right to existence retroactively invalidated. This is how the cultural being within us perishes if we allow – at least as theatre spectators – the transformation to take place within us. Yes, I am finally fulfilling my promise: let us go to the National Theatre to watch Theodoros Terzopoulos' production of *The Bacchae*.

As the nonexistent curtain rises, we see Cadmus sitting on his throne. Behind him on the wall are a hundred and ninety-six transfusion blood bags, symmetrically arranged. Tubes extend from them towards the king's body. On both sides, there are two enormous white bottles with the label "OXYGEN." The king sits on his throne in the middle of darkness as a massive blood spider, as a vampire king sustaining the world and sucking its lifeblood. The grid of blood bags resembles a dragon's teeth formation viewed from the sky, alluding to the primal myth of the city's foundation. However, Cadmus' reign is somewhat of a hospice, too, an intensive care unit, a ward of the last procurator of a dying world. For the faith in the gods has been shaken, and the world order of tradition is fragmenting.

Yet Dionysus appeared on this Earth – the way he accounts for the path he took to get here is likely a geographic and cultural-historical travel guide of the spread of the Dionysian cult – and summons his bacchantes to battle.

The devotees play out the performance with wide-eyed amazement and open mouths: a multitude of Dionysus masks. The voices of the actors are also highly stylized, as if they were speaking to us from behind masks. The Dionysian orgy is wild. Here, please note, is the soul of ancient Greek theatre. There are no metaphors, no sophisticated intellectual references; this performance does not address intellectuals, overcultured minds, but gut instincts. Tremendous force emanates from the stage, every performer is exceptional, no one stands out, nor can they, for in the collective Dionysian ecstasy, which they all experience and represent with elemental power, individual contours have dissolved. We are at the essence of the cult, at the source of blood.

The Greek word *pentheó* means to mourn, to grieve. Pentheus' name foretells his fate. Dionysus, as we have mentioned, punishes the unbelieving king in multiple ways. His ultimate punishment is to become what he saw the world as: torn to pieces. If we have learned from the performance, perhaps we will be capable each day of having our internal maenads tear asunder within our souls the philistine who remains insensitive to the wonder of existence and falsely labels their conformity as life harmony. So that we should not die in vain.

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Euripides: *The Bacchae*, National Theatre, Budapest, 2022, d: Theodoros Terzopoulos
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhez.hu)



10th international theatre olympics – mitem 9



“This Is by No Means a Passive, Enervated Generation”

Interview with Attila Vidnyánszky by *Szcenárium* Editors on
The Tragedy Performance of the International Madách Project

Editors: “*The Tragedy of Man or Mankind?*” – The late colleague of the National Theatre, Nina Király, had this repeatedly arising question as the title of her essay.¹ How do you, who directed *The Tragedy* for the sixth time within the framework of the international Madách project related to the bicentenary at the 10th Theatre Olympics, see this? It is surely not a coincidence that you chose this quote as the motto for MITEM 2021, and had it repeated several times in the current production as well: “Ah, in this tumult wild, What shall become of that self locked in me.” [“Óh, e zűr között / hová lesz énem zárt / egyénisége”]

A. V.: By addressing theatre students from eleven countries with our Madách project, it was settled on my part that I would stage *The Tragedy* as a drama of humanity. After all, these students, from Cairo to Toronto, from Tbilisi to Liverpool, represent humanity, the entirety of our modern world. The turning point in my interpretation of the drama came with my 2018 National Theatre production, in which I had several Lucifers appear. With this, I intended to illustrate that Adam’s intellectual aspect, his ‘locked self’ is nowadays increasingly exposed to Satan’s temptation and the influence of evil which replicates through division. This is why I deemed it important that in this production being created within the shipyard hall of Hajógyári Sziget [Island], the motto chosen in 2021 should be uttered in every language, which already served as the cry of the attacked individuality in the late-romantic Madách’s drama.

¹ The essay by theatre historian Nina Király (1940–2018) was published in Hungarian in the September 2018 issue of *Szcenárium*, and in English in the special MITEM English 2023 issue of *Szcenárium*.



Above is the logo of the 10th Theatre Olympics, below is the banner of the Madách Project of the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest, 2023 (source: nemzetisinhaz.hu)



Editors: The Madách project, in which nearly two hundred university students participated alongside Hungarians, is also notable for having all the roles of *The Tragedy* portrayed by members of the same generation. If we play back the footage of this production a few years from now, we wonder what we will find the demeanor of this generation, the unique features of their perception of the world and the overall image which the camera recorded the moment they stepped onto the stage.

A. V.: I was pleased to discover that this is by no means a passive, enervated generation. At the age of twenty, they too pose the eternal question that arises from their age: 'Who am I?' Just as Miklós Hubay expressed once in connection with Madách's drama, they also prove that humanity still has ample reserves: "In biological terms, there is nothing wrong with humanity, the *élan vital* ('life force') would still propel it like an arrow from a taut, well-tuned bow"². If we are going to watch these film recordings now, I believe the most striking aspect will be that the majority of the groups were sensitive to Madách's philosophical horizon. In the case of historical scenes, they did not opt for naturalistic representation either; the mode of performance was characterized by a kind of elevation, a spiritual surplus, from almost every ensemble. In terms of the intellectual profile of the generation, this overall picture seems very promising to me, and it will surely be discernible from the film recordings even years from now. It was this surplus energy that kept me personally continuously energized during the rehearsals.

Editors: Two of the teams did not come from the European Christian cult community, which shed entirely new light on the Egyptian and Byzantine scenes. You also had to take into account that various genres and artistic disciplines were present: the Egyptians set their historical scene to music, while the Georgians performed a complete dance drama apropos of the representation of space. What kind of additional challenges did this pose for you during the coordination of individual scenes?



At the end of the premiere of Madách: *The Tragedy of Man* on June 23, 2023, Attila Vidnyánszky with students from 11 countries

² You can find Miklós Hubay's commentary on the London scene and Eve's miraculous rescue in his work titled *Aztán mivégre az egész teremtés?*, published by Napkút Kiadó in 2010.

A. V.: The performance of the people from Cairo and Istanbul was truly a big surprise. Of course, if we know that present-day Egypt has been organizing international theatre festivals for decades with the regular participation of Hungarian companies as well, we cannot consider it accidental that they immediately said yes to our invitation. It is also worth calling to mind that their aspirations for independence, dating back to 1922, coincided with the discovery of Tutankhamun's burial chamber, which reinforced their sense of identity, namely that they are descendants of the pharaohs. Their production embodied this revived tradition in appearances, too, with the costume of the actor who acted as the pharaoh evoking concretely the funerary attire of Tutankhamun. Their gestures were characterized by the male-female relationship dominant in Muslim culture to this day, which is far from being about the subordination



Scene from *The Tragedy* in the Egyptian setting with students from the Academy of Arts, Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Giza

of women, but rather about the reverence of men towards the gentle gender. What we saw and heard from the Egyptians can be most closely related to medieval European knight culture and the love poetry of troubadours. This production might as well be referred to as a musical, but what truly made it memorable was the perfect prosody and the emotional intensity of melismatic Arabic music, which was not an imitation of this genre originating from America.

Editors: As far as the rendition of the Byzantine scene by the Istanbul group is concerned, what stood out was the subtlety in the interpretation of the religious controversies dividing Christianity. It is as if they approached the topic from the perspective of the ongoing Shiite-Sunni division present in the Muslim world, without any anti-Christian undertones. Opposition was to such an extent uncharacteristic of their mentality that Greek Orthodox liturgical chants even were included in their production.



Scene depicting Eve and the death of the slave at the performance on Hajógyári Island

A. V.: In my experience, the staging of space within *The Tragedy* poses the greatest challenge for directors. It is set in another spatial-temporal continuum, just like the scene in Heaven. However, the difference is also significant. While in the first scene, the angelic choir serves as the spokesperson for the creative idea and energy, and proclaims the goodness of the Lord, in space the ultimate physical endurance of human beings is tested, which no 20th-century advancements in space exploration

have surpassed. That is one reason why the Georgians' choice of genre was justified, as they transformed this scene into a dance drama. Above all, we must highlight the accomplishment of the soloist portraying Adam: the intensity of the movement he produced can only be achieved in an ecstatic state. The chorus serves as the springboard for this energy, and the initiation of its movement is reminiscent of choreography influenced by the Gurdjieff school. It is as if the chorus gives birth to and propels Adam, the "cosmic man," out of itself. That is why we get the impression that this interpretation of the space is based on the interpretation of the entire *Tragedy*, which, as seen in Adam's words yearning to return to the earthly realm ("I'm suffering, therefore I am – alive"), rhymes with the guiding motif of the second scene as well: "Life! Life! Sweet life! It's good to be alive!"³ It is not a coincidence either that the female figure portraying Lucifer also embodies, in a single form, the Spirit of the Earth, and if you prefer, even Eve herself.

Editors: In the Athenian scene, Greek students simultaneously built upon the communal rituals and choral techniques of ancient



The patriarch puppet in the Constantinople scene with the students from Istanbul Aydin University



Adam and Lucifer in the Outer Space scene, performed by the students of The Shota Rustaveli Theatre and Film Georgia State University in Tbilisi

³ (The quotes from Madách's work are taken from the English translation and adaptation by Iain Macleod, Imre Madách: *The Tragedy of Man*, Canongate Press, Edinburgh, 1993 in: <http://mek.oszk.hu/00900/00917/html/>)

tragedy, as well as contemporary Greek poetry, which infused their stage presence with a sense of personal connection throughout. It seems as if this interpretation of Madách's work was the closest to the ideal of "poetic theatre" you represent. Do we see this correctly?

A. V.: The Greeks' accomplishment served to me as a first and foremost example that in times of crisis, even "when the guns say", the muses are not silent. Not even are they silent if funding is withdrawn from culture, as is the case in Greece now, where, as it transpired, the Odeion Athinum, the performing arts academy founded in 1871, has also been subject to demotion in status. The initial reaction of the drama students to this measure was to go on strike, and reportedly they even occupied their national theatre. However, the truly worthy response to this situation of the visiting company was the interpretation of the Athenian scene, cathartic even in its novelty. The members of the chorus as a kind of collective self repeatedly posed here the poetic question "where am I" directed towards the existential vulnerability of man, until they arrived with the answer in Madách's ancient Athens, the scene of the dramatic action. Yet the story was not interpreted in the usual way, as a critique of ancient and modern democracies, but rather as the voluntary sacrifice of a victorious military leader accused of treason. Just as Madách himself suggests, when he puts the expression "a sense of comfort" in the mouth of his hero who is going to his death, implying redemption. "The Goddess heard you, Lucia. Farewell! / A sense of comfort wells up in my heart." Man, as Theodoros Terzopoulos claims, inevitably suffers defeat against God and accepts death, but his "funeral procession continues in eternity as well."⁴ Madách's *Tragedy* has, so to say, the Hungarian scene missing. However, when that particular archaic Hungarian folk song is unexpectedly

sung by the young Greeks, we hear it as the apotheosis of our fallen struggle for freedom with a sense of profound emotion. It is as if these two nations were sharing common codes in antiquity...

Editors: In Madách's Roman scene, the appearance of Apostle Peter is accompanied by cosmic-scale phenomena (see Madách's authorial instructions: "*With a great radiance the cross appears in the sky. Beyond the mountains the horizon is reddened by the flames of*



Students from the Athens Conservatoire Drama School in the Athens scene

⁴ See Theodoros Terzopoulos, *The Return of Dionysus*, in Hungarian, University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest, 2023, p. 60

burning cities. Savage hordes are seen descending from the heights, and from the distance the singing of hymns is heard.”). Your current direction also has this shift in cult as one of its key points. What considerations led you to connect the Roman scene presented by the Italians with the Byzantine scene performed by the Turkish students, bringing together all the characters in a tableau that could be featured on a movie screen?

A. V.: I followed the way Madách composed the Roman scene, where a substantial part of the text involves the appearance of Apostle Peter, which is both a curse speech and an evangelizing sermon addressed to the characters of this scene, embracing the ideals of the new world era, promising the arrival of brotherhood and the liberation of the individual at the same time. Watching the Italian’s production, the question of whether Madách’s work is “The Tragedy of Man or Mankind?” may arise again. This direction⁵ did not mean to portray the depravity of an empire in a naturalistic way. The mode of acting was characterized by a strong stylization reminiscent of *commedia dell’arte*. Lucifer did not make an appearance as a cynical game master, but rather played the role of Death itself as a white clown. And those motifs became prominent which distinguish in Madách also the duet of Adam and Eve from the other two couples immersed in physical pleasures. That is why it is not disturbing either that my directing colleague stripped the actors naked after the apostolic allocution was delivered. I only made one change to this, that in the final version presented, it is only Adam who sheds his old self: we see him in a fetal position, as the promise of the New Adam.



Apostle Peter in the Rome scene, performed by Centro Teatro Attivo in Milan



The skull of the giant skeleton

⁵ The director of this scene was Sebastian Mattia, who as the head of ISCOT led the demonstration of the Suzuki training method at MITEM 2023.



Lucifer as the angel of death in the Roman scene

a simultaneous presence in the Christian salvation story as well. By presenting the primal element of fire in two different ways and orchestrating the entrance of the crowd carrying candles and torches, I aimed to show the dual nature of Man – the longing for salvation and the elemental passion for destruction. As for the cinematic quality of this sequence, this impression could also arise from the very size of the hall. In this gigantic space, the use of natural light created the effect as if this ritualistic action took place at night, under the stars, opening up a new dimension for humanity.

Editors: The English, the Canadians, and the two Romanian groups approached their chosen scenes from the perspective of humour. The most surprising one of them was the radical contemporary adaptation of the two Prague scenes and the Eskimo scene by the Romanians. Madách's text was faithfully adhered to in the latter, too, but the performance itself was a female-dominated



Lucifers in red swimsuits in the Eskimo scene, around the dying Adam. In the picture, students from the Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest

Turning to the Byzantine scene, it is important to note that only the Turkish participants used masks and puppets, emphasizing that this story unfolds on the border between life and death. That is why I decided to incorporate from my 2018 production the elements of the giant skeleton, with a strong emphasis on the skull, which dominates the stage from now on. With this, I also wanted to indicate that the beginning and the end, destruction and resurrection have

erotic farce: a triumph of sex, the victory of life force, through which the dying Adam was ultimately revitalized into new life. It is as if this elemental vitality was currently missing from Hungarian theatrical practice. What do you think is the reason for this?

A. V.: Honestly, even I haven't not been able to decipher it yet. And yet Madách's work is quite suitable for parody as well. It is enough to think of Karinthy, the Hungarian master of humoristic literature, who was captivated by

this work from his childhood and even published a concise, parodic adaptation of it in verse form titled *Az emberke tragédiája* [*The Tragedy of Manlet*]. The English and Canadians approached the London and Outer Space scenes with a similar attitude, holding up a distorted mirror to their own generation and their nation, simultaneously. Two renderings are worth highlighting specially: the game master of the Liverpool group, the female Lucifer, who with the harsh boldness and confidence of street performers, introduced and commented on the grassroots contemporary adaptation of this scene. In the episode by the Canadians that seemed to belong on a cabaret stage, the young man playing Adam appeared as if he was portraying directly Karinthy's character, "Ádámka." That is why I decided to incorporate this production as the puppetry segment in the London scene, employing the technique of "play within a play."

But let us not forget to mention the Parisian scene either, which the French presented in a traditional interpretation. However, they also introduced a grotesque character, the headsman, who constantly juxtaposed this linguistically sophisticated, classical performance style. I further developed this comedic element when I staged the revolution as a bloody carnival. The execution device borrowed from the National Theatre, which in the 2018 production served as both a printing press and a guillotine, in the final version not only executes the "children of the revolution," but also chops watermelon heads. We must acknowledge that the idealised romanticism of the Parisian Revolution on stage has lost its relevance for today's audience. The two enlosing



Adam and the Spirit of Earth in the Outer Space scene, with two students from York University in Toronto



The Lucifer of the English, Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts



The Paris scene by the students of EICAR,
The International Film and Television School in Paris



The figure of the executioner with the heads
and the giant skull



The graduating class from Bucharest as Emperor
Rudolf and the courtiers in the first Prague scene

Prague scenes in the interpretation of the Romanian participants are also not imbued with the type of resignation or disillusionment from the ideals of “progress” which we are accustomed to, where Kepler was made out to be the hero of his time as an un-understood scientist. The first Prague scene starts here with the comic dumb show of five androgynous courtiers, wearing male jackets and lace panties, all vying for the favour of Borbála. And from this point on, the side characters stand in the foreground and the female caricature of Emperor Rudolf dominates, pushing the conflict between the couple, Adam–Kepler and Eva–Borbála, into the background. I also preserved the Romanian-created stage design with its tripartite vertical and depth structure, so that it be sensed rather than seen that in the middle, where the virtual lines of force in the space converge, some kind of erotic act is actually taking place – whether it is adultery or the rape of the wife. I have never seen the psychological drama unfolding within Borbála so transparent as now, thanks to this young Romanian company. This was probably due to the fact that the spirit tempting her was here also embodied by a woman-Lucifer, who roamed through the entire space and took possession of it. Kepler’s homelessness was indicated by his inability to enter this active playing area. That is why I decided that he would occupy the farthest and

highest suspended walkway in the hall with his giant telescope. And I also had him sketch out a child drawing featuring the sun, a little house and two trees, to portray his state of mind. Kepler descends to the second Prague scene only when the two ambitious teenage girls playing the roles of his male students approach him, demanding that he provide them with up-to-date, practical knowledge. Yet, no matter how humorously this scene comes across on the stage, it might remind us that the manner

of transmission between generations is one of the greatest challenges of our times. The Prague scene does not ultimately boil down to this full-blooded, humorously exposed generational conflict. Borbála's monologue, in which she once again laments the existential vulnerability of women's fate, lends a tragic tone to this historical scene as well. As for the mentioned Eskimo scene, at first glance, it indeed stands farthest from Madách's original vision. But if we take the entirety of the play as a starting point, as the Romanians clearly did, this interpretation does not seem so far-fetched anymore. It is possible that the fever dream they put on stage here is a continuation of that visionary state, which Adam had to undergo when he realized that after being expelled from Paradise, he now had to bear the burden of existence all by himself. "Remove this sight! This is insanity! / This fight, harassed by elemental forces, / tormented by the pangs of desolation... / Appalling, hideous predicament!" he cries out in the third scene. In reality, every personality destined for greatness experiences this shock at the pivotal moment of growing up, and not everyone survives this trauma. As for the dilemma of whether a sexual act occurred between Adam and Eve in the Eskimo scene, crucial evidence for this union could be Eve's first words after waking up: "Adam, why did you steal away from me? / You seemed remote. Your kisses



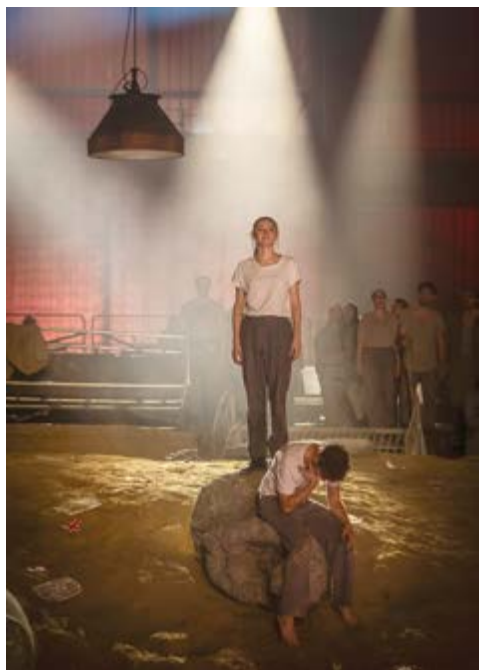
The scene of the violation of Barbara in the first Prague scene, with the female Lucifer in the foreground



The students of the Rippl-Rónai Institute of Arts and Theatre at Kaposvár University as Adams and Eves in the Garden of Eden scene



Mass scene with all the actors in the Phalanstery scene



Adam and Eve in the fifteenth scene outside of the Garden of Eden with the students of the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest

made me shiver.”⁶ But how can this be brought to the stage? Perhaps indeed only with that full-blooded humour this troupe had, with the vitality and self-assured confidence that belongs to those in their twenties.

Editors: Just two weeks before the premiere, the Phalanstery scene was still not ready, so you had to take on the responsibility for it as well, along with the framing scenes. It could not have been easy to simultaneously evoke our inhumane, massified world with its Babel-like language confusion and, at the same time, conjure up a genuine celebration by the end of the ten-day gathering of these two hundred young people, conveying the sense that thanks to Madách, they managed to find a common language. How did this exceptional moment come about?

A. V.: First and foremost, it is worth considering that in Madách’s work, the historical scenes culminate with the London scene. The following three – the Phalanstery, Outer Space, and Eskimo – scenes were negative utopias, nightmares of the future in Madách’s age. However, Phalanstery, along with Outer Space, has become a part of our everyday reality by now.

This is why I decided that as early as

in the Garden of Eden scene, the faceless, gray-clad mass should appear, and then the Fall should be celebrated by the entire cast, too. With this decision though, I

⁶ See for this the article by Ágnes Pálfi in Hungarian: *A női éberség másállapota – Éva alakjáról Az ember tragédiájában*, *Szcenárium*, September 2013, pp 29– 41; and in English: Ágnes Pálfi: *The Pregnancy of Feminine Vigilance in The Tragedy of Man, Theatre Olympics and MITEM English*, April, 2023, pp 97–104

had to let go of the portrayal of the first human couple's naive, ethereal purity and innocence. I am sorry that I could not incorporate into the final version the Polish interpretation of the creation story, where the first human couple descends as the likeness of the Creator and hovers above the angels moving, building and wrecking the created world. Nor could I do this for the very reason that the technical conditions required for such presentations were not available at this location, unlike



First Scene. Adam, Eve, and the Angels' Choir, Warsaw Film School, Poland

at the Eiffel Workshop House where the introductions had taken place. My great predecessor, Antal Németh, directed *The Tragedy* in Hamburg in 1937 with the intention of presenting it on a par with *Faust* to the cultured European audience. However, when he realized that the Germans viewed the Phalanstery scene as an open attack against National Socialism, he used Cyrillic lettering as a precaution so that this scene should explicitly refer to the Soviet Union. *The Tragedy* was banned from the stage in Hungary after 1948 due to its pessimistic tone and it did not change until 1954, when it was staged by the drama group of Madách Grammar School and performed seven times at the Small Hall of the Liszt Academy of Music. Back then it was an open rebellion against the prevailing conditions, and it had the support of some of the most prominent figures of the time, including Zoltán Kodály. I feel that once again, a young generation has set an example of how we can actively engage with the contradictions of our time. This is where the budding artists, their mentors, and the audience of this one-off performance came together.

Editors: Will there be a continuation of this international project? What benefits can this exceptional event have for the Hungarian participants and the entire Hungarian higher education in drama and theatre? The Madách Year is still going on: do you think this venture can promote a reinterpretation of *The Tragedy of Man*?

A. V.: As a stage director I do not perceive whether new literary interpretations of *The Tragedy of Man* will be formed in connection with this anniversary. However, I believe Antal Németh was right when, together with Álmos Jaschik, he advocated with his entire activity that the most active and important arena for the continuous reinterpretation of this Madách piece is the stage.

6 July, 2023

*All the Madách project photos were taken
by Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszhaz.hu
Translated by Nóra Durkó*



JUDIT UNGVÁRI

Harmony of Diversity and Unity

Scenes from the 9th MITEM



The Madách International Theatre Meeting, held in the framework of the 10th International Theatre Olympics, once again provided many exciting lessons. It raised three major themes: the war, humankind's ecological responsibility and the dialogue between East and West in the language of theatre – and sometimes these themes overlapped.

The ancient Olympics were a time of peace and dialogue, and the Theatre Olympics was conceived along similar lines, as we heard during a discussion of theatre-historic significance¹ between two founders of the Olympics and

emblematic creators of world theatre, Tadashi Suzuki from Japan and Theodoros Terzopoulos from Greece. The 83-year-old Japanese master reflected on whether humanity has become more advanced thanks to the modernisation of technology. According to Suzuki, *advanced civilisation vs human advancement* is one of the most important issues today and also chimes in with the ecological theme of the meeting. Terzopoulos discussed the issue of *weapons vs muses* in the context



Conversation between T. Suzuki and T. Terzopoulos at the National Theatre in Budapest on April 18, 2023

¹ The Theatre Olympics mindset and collaboration: Theodoros Terzopoulos and Suzuki Tadashi in conversation – 18.04.2023.

of the birth of the Olympic ideal, and expressed his conviction that there is no future without traditions rooted in national culture. In this context, he highlighted the importance of *particularities* vs *globalisation* and the dialogue between East and West.

Advanced civilisation vs human advancement

Can we change at all? Can we keep pace with the explosive technological advances? Or are we mostly running round the same circles, as we have so many times since the dawn of civilisation? According to Tadashi Suzuki, Greek plays contain all the fundamental conflicts that still characterise human coexistence: crime, war, family conflicts.

Illusions about human nature

Liberty Theatre from Tbilisi adapted two well-known Shakespeare plays, *Othello* and *Richard III*, exploring the eternal problem of human evil and reflecting on our times, too. The style of director Avtandil Varsimasvili may not be unfamiliar to Hungarian spectators, since in January, he directed the National Theatre's production of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Now we had a first-hand experience of his own workshop at home: his Georgian theatre employs a theatrical, powerful, spectacular acting style with high emotional amplitude.

Both productions featured innovative, brilliant theatrical solutions, such as the multifunctional stage 'object' of *Richard III*: this steel structure could be transformed as needed into a table, then into a cell, but it could also function as a coffin and, in some cases, as a bridge plank. In *Othello*, the crossbar with the curtains proved to be a similarly versatile object: it could be interpreted as an entrance to a bedroom, as a sail hoisted on a bar or as a stage.



W. Shakespeare: *Richard III*, Tbilisi Theatrical Centre and Liberty Theatre, 2014, d: Avtandil Varsimashvili



W. Shakespeare: *Othello*, Tbilisi Theatrical Centre and Liberty Theatre, d: Avtandil Varsimashvili



Richard III (Apolon Kublashvili)
with his long shadow



Othello (Goga Babakadze) „mummifies“
Desdemona



Based on the texts of H. von Hofmannsthal and
Sophocles: *Electra*, 1995, 2007, d: Tadashi Suzuki.
Clytemnestra and her nurse (source: mitem.hu)

The director's concept of *Richard III* (Apolon Kublashvili) resembling a devil with hooves (in the limelight at one point) was impressive and thought-provoking. As was the climax in *Othello*, when the title character (Goga Barbakadze), instead of simply strangling Desdemona, memorably played by Ani Alidashvili, wraps her in a blood-red shroud as though in a ritual sacrifice.

Murder, violence, revenge in Shakespeare's plays, as in Greek tragedies, are man's 'scourge', a pathological condition from which he should be cured. The Suzuki Company's *Electra* is a case in point: by setting the action – or rather its aftermath – in a psychiatric ward, this adaptation hands down a severe verdict on the mental state of Clytemnestra for murdering her husband, and on their daughter Electra for seeking revenge. Avtandil Varsimashvili's *Richard* also demonstrates that the crimes of a man wading through dead bodies are intrinsically punished as we watch him gradually descend into madness with fear and distrust. Distrust is also an apt keyword to describe *Othello's* mental state: in his case (as the director put it at the meeting with the audience) we witness his struggle with his complexes as he succumbs to evil machinations without resistance.

Director Declan Donnellan explored the cruel interplay between the imaginary and reality in his adaptation of the great

Spanish Baroque author Calderón's *Life is a Dream*. This was the first Spanish-language production of Cheek by Jowl, a London-based international company founded in 1981.

'...What intrigues us in Calderón's story is what has always been part of the human condition: virtual reality has been with us since the dawn of time. Thanks to our imagination, we have always found a passageway to another form of existence. Interestingly, genuine art can always take us back to reality. Human nature does not change, only technology does. Of course, the latter can open up frightening perspectives,' – said the director in an interview.

The director, who is 'Irish by birth, English by upbringing, European by culture', received a huge ovation in Madrid last December for this production, and critics lavished praise on him. His was an exciting undertaking in every sense, as it must have been a daunting task to trim the sprawling, intricate Spanish classic full of twists to a palatable size for modern audiences. Another challenge was the issue of modernity: it would have been a waste to stage such a play as a period piece out of a museum. Donnellan and his permanent partner Nick Ormerod created a thoroughly modern production with minimalist sets and costumes that are indicative only, but distinctly contemporary. On the other hand, they did not modernise the text at all, preserving the original language of the Spanish classic. The contrast between the archaic text and the production's contemporary appearance is one of its greatest achievements. The audience is addressed directly all the time, creating an atmosphere of intimacy and closeness. The sitcom-style of the performance was interesting, as it responded to today's issues and reflected the world of TV shows. Of the Spanish cast, the performances of David Luque, Ernesto Arias, Manuel Moya and Irene Serrano were particularly noteworthy.

The other London-based theatre, Complicité, turning 40 this year, also brought a new production of its own, '*Drive your Plough Over the Bones of the Dead*', based on the work of Nobel laureate Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk. This multi-genre stage adaptation is in a league of its own: is it an eco-novel, a metaphysical crime story or, as The Guardian put it, 'an existential thriller'? The production, based on Simon McBurney's philosophical novel embedded in a detective story, is very recent: it premiered in December 2022 and has received accolades in the international media for its innovative directorial concept,



Pedro Calderón de la Barca: *Life is a Dream*,
Cheek by Jowl, London, 2022, d: Declan Donnellan



Based on the novel by Olga Tokarczuk: *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, Company Complicité, London, 2022, d: Simon McBurney



Winter landscape in the performance



The protagonist (Kathryn Hunter) among performers wearing animal masks

masterly technical execution, the quality of its physical stage solutions, and the humour with which the creators present the serious, topical social and political message. In broad terms, one can agree with all that, though one could argue that the production is overly text-centred: the protagonist's narrative dominates the stage almost throughout, just about turning the play into a monodrama. However, the stage design, choreography, video installations and special lighting effects (stage and costume design by Rae Smith; lighting design by Paule Constable; sound design by Christopher Shutt; video design by Dick Straker; movement by Toby Sedgwick) make up for that. The lead actress, Kathryn Hunter, despite her frail frame, carries the performance with enormous energy, authentically communicating the writer's underlying sense of ecological responsibility, i.e. that we humans have a duty to animals: we must help them live out their lives and must return our pets' love and affection, because they give us so much more than they receive. Hunter is a great actress: she has won the Laurence Olivier Award, played male roles, such as King Lear and Richard III, and has also directed at the Royal Shakespeare Company.

The second piece of the festival's eco-theme was directed by world-famous Belgian 'interdisciplinary artist' Jan Fabre. Writer, director, choreographer, performer, painter

and sculptor, Jan Fabre composed his production of *Resurrexit Cassandra* to the poetic lyrics by Italy's Ruggero Cappuccio, written especially for this performance. The poetic text was brought to life as a dance drama in this one-woman show, and German actress Stella Höttler gave a stunning, ecstatic metamorphosis performance.

Cassandra's 'resurrection' draws attention to our 'universal human hubris': we believe we are not inferior to the gods and treat everything on Earth extremely wastefully, to the point of depriving ourselves of the bare necessities of life so we become the victims of our wastefulness. It is not by accident that Earth appears in the performance, not only as a reference, but also as a concrete material. The five colours – the lush green of Eden, black for fertile soil, royal blue for the sea, blood red and finally white, representing the airiness, coldness and emptiness of space – were also present physically, as they followed each other in this sequence whenever the actress changed her clothes, giving the play and the interpretation a particular trajectory. The appearance of the turtles was also exciting. The symbolism of this hard-shelled prehistoric animal is incredibly rich: in Asian cultures it played a major role in the creation of the world, in Western cultures it symbolises wisdom and longevity. Darwin arrived at the idea of evolution based on the Galapagos tortoise; and from this perspective the troubling question arises: does man, at the 'pinnacle' of evolution, deserve the gift of Earth? How many times must Cassandra be resurrected before we listen to her and heed her prophecies?



Ruggero Cappuccio: *Resurrexit Cassandra*, Troubleyn / Jan Fabre, Antwerpen, 2019, d: Jan Fabre, in the photo: Stella Höttler



Cassandra with the tortoise



Franz Kafka: *Report to an Academy*, Zero Point Theatre, Athen, 2021, d: Savvas Troumpos



CCY – *WITKAC-Y Menagerie*, Witkacy Theatre, Zakopane, 2009, d: Andrzej St. Dziuk

Dziuk intended as a very concrete reference to today's disoriented society blinded by fear, prosperity, laziness, and the media.

Guns vs muses

War was the other focal theme of this festival, although one wonders in several cases whether the artists were reflecting on an ongoing conflict or on their premonition of the threat of war. The latter may be true in most, which demonstrates the power of art and justifies the juxtaposition of the two terms in the heading. For in times of war, the muses may not be silent at all – many productions revealed brutal and depressing current scenes along with stage poetry that survives it all.

A war of narratives – this is the shocking diagnosis established in Robert Icke's *The Doctor*, premièred in London in 2019, staged by the company of the Csiky Gergely Hungarian State Theatre of Timisoara, directed by Romania's

Our responsibility to nature and the animal kingdom was also present in the Kafka adaptation *A Report to the Academy*. Founded in 2008, the young Greek company Zero Point Theatre of Athens adapted under the direction of founder Savvas Stroumpos one of Franz Kafka's well-known metamorphosis stories about the humanisation of a monkey called Rotpeter.

The same dichotomy, animal vs human, was presented with plenty of humour in the brilliantly absurd sketch comedy *CCY-Witkac-y-Menagerie* by Witkacy Theatre of Zakopane, based on the juvenalia of Polish avant-garde theatre genius Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. The creators contrast the playful childhood impersonation of animals with the final scene's dystopian phalanster vision of people in grey clothes groping about blindly, which director Andrzej Stanisław

world-famous Andrei Șerban. The production is an ironic reflection on current phenomena around racial, religious and sexual identity, criticising prejudices as much as it criticises the opposing woke culture.

The Doctor is based on Arthur Schnitzler's 1912 play *Professor Bernhadi*, skilfully updated by the contemporary author. The basic conflict is that Ruth Wolff, founding doctor-director of the Elizabeth Institute, refuses to let a Catholic priest into the operating

theatre where a girl is dying because of a self-administered abortion. This turns into a media scandal that leads to professional harassment that practically ruins the protagonist's life and career. But while Schnitzler's play includes a real court hearing, Icke's adaptation focuses on media bullying. In this environment, one camp's leading opinion often becomes definitive. The 'public' passes judgement on professional competence and even the person without knowing the facts. Without responsibility and without consequences.

Romanian director Andrei Șerban knows how to play with styles even in this very realistic piece: after sitcom-style acting and scenes, he almost imperceptibly shifts into hard-core drama harking back to classical tragedies. The actors deliver meticulously developed characters with clear motivations and voices. The hardest task is undoubtedly that of the leading actress: in the version I saw, Erzsébet B. Fülöp was thoroughly moving in the role of Ruth Wolff.

Bros by Romeo Castellucci and the Societas company of Cesena was premièred in October 2021 at FIT Festival, Lugano, South Switzerland. The director made it clear in advance that he would be working with a locally selected cast receiving their instructions through earpieces. This may be interpreted as a metaphor for real-life co-operation: do we know where we are guided and what



Robert Icke: *The Doctor*, Csiky Gergely Hungarian State Theatre, Timișoara, 2023, d: Andrei Șerban



The role of Ruth Wolff played by Erzsébet B. Fülöp



Romeo Castellucci: *Bros*, Societas, Cesena, 2021, d: Romeo Castellucci. In the picture: Valer Dellakeza as the Prophet Jeremiah



Police officers, the victim, and a baboon in the performance

we are instructed to do, by whom, with what intentions? Do we still have our own free will? Spectators are left to ponder many unsettling questions in the course of this alarming vision. An old Romanian actor, Valer Dellakeza, appeared at the beginning of the performance, chanting from the Book of Jeremiah in his mother tongue, indistinctly. He is the misunderstood prophet who used to warn the people of Israel of the threat of slavery, he starts and ends the performance, as the young boy who appears at the end is presumably his reincarnation.

The director's collaborator Silvano Voltolina told the audience meeting that Castellucci's first inspiration for this production came as he saw the police swarm the streets of Paris after the terrorist attacks. Most people in the Budapest audience were frustrated by the march of policemen with dogs into the auditorium and forming a terrifying line. It was also chilling to see people twitch like fish out of water or to watch them

beat and torture each other. Because the essence of the police metaphor is that any one of us can be an executioner or a victim. 'Hell itself, although eternal, dates from the revolt of Lucifer,' says Beckett in a recording shown during the performance. But we may also quote Sartre: 'Hell is the others' (l'enfer, c'est les autres). And it may well be that hell is within us, and that they that punish others punish themselves. We don't yet know whether the boy in white receiving the baton at the end of the performance and striking his palm with it will choose to be a prophet or a policeman. "Pullo et Ovo," reads the inscription on the black curtain. A good question, indeed, which came first: the chicken or the egg...

Euripides' classic *The Trojan Women* is brought to MITEM by Wybrzeże Theatre from Gdańsk, directed by Jan Klata. Dramaturge Olga Smiechowicz combined three plays in this adaptation: Euripides' *The Trojan Women* and

Hecabe, and one of his satires on a related theme, which was removed from the production when the war in Ukraine broke out.

The opening scene is memorable: a sandcastle against the backdrop of a sea of sand covering the stage; a punk girl standing behind it wearing something like a wedding dress, boots, and holding an electric guitar – enough to tip the audience off that she may be Cassandra. Then enter the gods and kick the sandcastle apart like little kids in a playground. Cassandra strikes the strings and we learn what happened in Troy the day after the Greeks won.

Jan Klata's direction nails the spectators to the seat and won't let go of them for one moment. The stage visuals are stunning (set and costume design by Mirek Kaczmarek). The actors stumble among the torsos of male statues sunk in the sand, and the costumes are astonishing: the chorus of women wears a single black hooded

top made for several heads; or the haggard appearance of the Greek warriors with the stiff dumb antique faces on their masks and six-pack T-shirts under their clothes. The first climax of this superbly composed performance is Polyxena's 'sacrifice'. This scene of rape and murder is both beastly and poetic – it is an exceptional achievement by the company to have managed to present both qualities at the same time.

'History is written by the victors,' cited the creators the well-known proverb at the audience meeting. But this performance also poses very specific questions, such as: would we, like the 'civilised' Greeks, be as barbaric as the 'barbarians' we defeated? Would we take revenge for the killing of our loved ones the same way as Hecabe? Can a theatre performance change man's thirst for revenge? The question is obviously rhetorical.

The National Theatre of Belgrade presented a cathartic and beautiful adaptation of Tolstoy's gigantic *War and Peace*. Dramaturge Fedor Šili condensed



Euripides: *The Trojan Women*, Wybrzeże Theatre, Gdansk, 2018, d: Jan Klata



The violation of Polyxena scene



Leo N. Tolstoy: *War and peace*, National Theatre Belgrade, 2022, d: Boris Liješević

Tolstoy's vast ocean of a text into a concise stage version (370 pages in first reading ultimately trimmed down to 70 pages). The outcome was a production that was both 'palatable' and true to the novel. Director Boris Liješević retained the main plot line and the narrative philosophy, but 'abandoned' the tableau. All the stage solutions merged into a vibrant, emotionally moving and thought-provoking whole. The emotional encounter of Andrei Bolkonsky and Natasha Rostova at

the ball was as heartbreaking as Pierre Bezukhov's plea to the audience, 'raise your hand if you believe there will ever be peace'. Beautifully choreographed movement theatre (by Mirko Knežević) played a major role in this staging. The 'dance' of Andrei and Napoleon, for example, is very effective, evoking the battle of Austerlitz more expressively than any crowd scene. Danilo Lončarević as Andrei is exactly as one imagines the character reading the book: restrained and disciplined, yet full of passion. Teodora Dragičević portrays Natasha with extraordinary dramatic power. Hadži Nenad Maričić, who plays Pierre, creates a quirky, idealistic, heartfelt figure. Even in the smallest roles, we see profoundly understood and experienced characters; a few examples: Miodrag Krivokapić as Bolkonsky the elder or Nina Nešković as Sonja. The Belgrade National Theatre has an enviable company.

A grand theatrical tableau of history by Heiner Goebbels, one of the most important contemporary representatives of avant-garde theatre, *Everything that Happened and Would Happen* is a unique interdisciplinary artistic vision using Patrik Ouředník's novel *Europeana – A Short History of the Twentieth Century* as a starting point, but also based on John Cage's *Europera 1&2* and no-comment news footage. The world première of the show combining live music, movement and large-scale multimedia installations was in 2018 at Mayfield Depot by Manchester's Piccadilly station, and Budapest's Tüskecsarnok provided a perfect setting for this poetic vision.

The performers in black coveralls kept moving in the rectangular space marked out by the musicians' 'sound stations', pushing, pulling, dragging various objects and folding fabrics, some of which they would occasionally latch onto the descending supports. These were used both as projection screens and as visual elements with a meaning of their own. The rolling bins with neon tubes around their mouths resembling mine trolleys also served as practical

storage containers for the various objects used in the performance. The music, largely based on noise art elements, dominated the entire production. The fragmented text used in the performance (the book is now available also in Hungarian) was presented with a subtle sense of humour. The Paris-based Czech author's text resonated poetically with the imagery of today's 'media reality' and John Cage's experimental acoustic collage. The final scene's long, tubular rods moving slowly to transform into tank barrels and the monstrous machine smoking ominously against the idyllic backdrop were a warning that it is not over; that Europe is still where it was a century ago, in the time of the Great War...

Produced by Teatro Stabile di Torino and Teatro Nazionale Torino, *The Tempest* is Italian director Alessandro Serra's poetic vision of Shakespeare's last play. The opening scene immediately captivated the audience: a huge, black silk billowing over the stage, with Ariel beneath it, moving the waves at the bottom of the sea. This grand vision was surrounded by the chaotic sounds of boat crews tossed about by a storm on unseen waters.

The minimalistic imagery of Serra's *Macbett*, a great success at last year's MITEM, also characterised this production: the play of light and shadow, the white costumes against a black background, the contrast between the abstract empty space and garish clothes capture the



Everything that Happened and Would Happen, 2018, concept, music, direction: Heiner Goebbels



The closing scene of the performance with smoking cannon barrels



W. Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, Teatro Stabile di Torino – Teatro Nazionale, Torino, 2022, d: Alessandro Serra (photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage, source: festival-avignon.com)



Prospero (Marco Sgrosso), Miranda (Maria Irene Minelli), and Caliban (Jared Mc Neill) on the square stage platform (photo: Stéphane Baré, source: ouvertauxpublics.fr)

audience's attention from scene to scene. There are no sets, the space is organised by a single element: a square platform that acts as a stage on the stage. Serra, as he pointed out at the audience meeting, is creating real poor theatre, albeit relying heavily on improvisation. For him, the actor is the most important thing. It is not the written word that matters, but the encounter of living thought with the audience through the actor, in keeping with his master Yves Lebreton's philosophy.

The Tempest is about forgiveness and Prospero finds the strength to

make this sacrifice. 'Theatre is like life, it just won't die', said Alessandro Serra at the audience meeting.

An adaptation of Nikolai Erdman's *The Suicide* was performed by the Théâtre National Populaire, directed by Jean Bellorini. The subtitle's genre designation as Soviet vaudeville proved to be apt: indeed, it is a musical farce, but the performance was also a dazzling stylistic feat. A couple of years ago, the Macedonian National Theatre presented a much more realistic production at MITEM than the one we saw now. The current version, turning from a farce into a tragedy, tricked the audience into laughing through the performance thinking they were watching a pure comedy.

Semyon Podsekalknikov, the insignificant 'hero' who is about to sacrifice himself and who in his fleeting glory believes his life will become meaningful

through the death he offers to the collective – this seems to be the added value that best explains why this Erdman play remains on stage. Jean Bellorini dwells at length on a Christ simile: in a comic group portrait reminiscent of Leonardo's painting of *The Last Supper*, the characters are seen drinking vodka as they wait for Podsekalknikov's 'noble' sacrifice.



Nicolai Erdman: *The Suicide*, soviet vaudeville, Théâtre National Populaire, Villeurbanne, 2022, d: Jean Bellorini (source: mitem.hu)

Do such actions make any sense? Is there any point in dying for any principle at all?', the creators of the

performance asked, along with the writer, and provided a clear answer at the end of the play. A video clip is shown of a Russian rapper announcing his suicide because of the war, because he does not want to be conscripted or have to point a gun at others. Bellorini told us that the video was included in the performance due to the chilling coincidence that this rapper had the same name as the character who is mentioned in the play but never appears, only the news of his suicide arrives at the end. This is where the farce of around two hours becomes a genuine drama, a reflection on the tragedy of the present. The audience is left wondering which is the more absurd world: the one on stage or life itself? And it may well be that the scales tip towards the latter...



Ivan Petunin's video message as the closing image of the performance

Particularities vs globalisation

In this context, the name and the theatrical world of Tadashi Suzuki should be mentioned again: in addition to the productions by the Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT) (*Electra*, *The Trojan Women*), he also presented his theoretical work at the festival. As part of MITEM's programme, his book *Culture is the Body* (translated by József Jámbo) was presented in Hungarian, featuring the master's writings on the theory and philosophy of theatre. In addition, a special symposium gave us the opportunity to get to know the basics of his theatrical approach and the most important elements of his actor training, with a sample shown in a practical



Euripides: *The Trojan Women*, SCOT (Suzuki Company of Toga), 2014, d: Tadashi Suzuki

demonstration. The Japanese master, one of the greatest theatre-makers of the 20th century, was driven from the Japanese capital in 1976 by a desire to find his own artistic path and set up his own company in the small isolated village in Toga.

‘To understand the world, you need both a central and a marginal perspective,’ said the creator who sought to establish a centre in Toga from which to extend his vision for the theatre to New York, Paris or even the North Pole. This ambition has proved so successful that the centre, based in a village of around 400, has become one of the world’s best-known theatre workshops, attracting actors from all over the world (including Hungarian actor Gábor Viktor Kozma, a lecturer at Babeş-Bolyai University) to learn this unique method and approach, which has made the Japanese theatre tradition an integral part of contemporary world theatre.

Another senior master, Eugenio Barba, directed the production *Anastasis* (Resurrection) at MITEM. It is rare to see anywhere in the world so many



Anástasis (Resurrection), 17th ISTA – International School of Theatre Anthropology presents / Theatrum Mundi Ensemble, 2023, composed and directed by Eugenio Barba



The Brazilian-Hungarian dance duel

cultures come together on one stage as in this production based on festive rites and rituals. The ISTA – International School of Theatre Anthropology and Theatrum Mundi Company production was the outcome of a workshop held in Pécsvárad on 8-20 May 2023 under the direction of 86-year-old master Eugenio Barba. Representatives of some thirty nations created this performance, drawing on their own traditions, with Japanese Noh, Chinese Nanquan opera, Balinese Topeng, Indian Baul dance, Kathakali, Brazilian Bumba Meu Boi and flamenco combined in an integral whole. The diversity of the show was dazzling, featuring captivating Japanese, playful Italian, vibrant Brazilian, mysterious Balinese and energetic Hungarian elements.

We all probably share the belief that there is a higher, spiritual rebirth, as we saw in this allegorical resurrection story. A perfect harmony in diversity was achieved

thanks to Master Barba and his collaborators: we could marvel at the meditative melodies of Japanese Koto, the primordial power of the Baul singer, or the witty and virtuoso duel between Hungarian folk dancer István Berecz and his Brazilian partner, giving the large audience a first-hand experience of today's exciting world.

Special cultural links lead via Eugenio Barba's workshop to the company of Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo, which has collaborated with India's Kalatharangini Kathakali School to create an amazing East-West encounter in the Indian classical dance theatre production *Stories from Mahabharata*. The monumental production, lasting around seven and a half hours, astonished the Hungarian audience with its unusual theatrical language.

Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo discovered the world of Kathakali theatre some forty-five years ago, as we learned from the introductory remarks of company director Tiziana Barbiero. The team was 'infected' by this archaic theatrical form; many have been mastering it ever since. The audience had a chance to prepare for the performance, a Kalatharangini Kathakali School and Bergamo Theatre co-production: those interested could take part in a workshop and learn about Kathakali techniques and get an insight into mask-making. The performance, directed by Dr Kalamandalam John, was based on three stories from the great Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*. We had access to a fascinating culture we know so little about. The stories of the child Krishna and an episode from the life of the adult Krishna were presented from sunset to sunrise by Indian and Italian performers. The Budapest



Mask making the day before the performance



Stories from Mahabharata, Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo and Kalatharangini Kathakali School (India), d: Dr. Kalamandalam John



Scene from the performance



The story of Noble Dakini Nangsa Obum,
Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), India,
d: Samten Dhondup

audience proved to be very open to this archaic form, as very few people trickled away during the long hours, and those who stayed rewarded the performers, including the musicians, with a standing ovation for their outstanding physical and mental performance: they had worked practically non-stop through the night.

The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts participated as a guest in the programme with the traditional Tibetan opera *The Story of Noble Dakini Nangsa Obum*. In an introductory discussion preceding the performance, director Samten Dhondup told us that after China invaded Tibet in 1951 and the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso fled to Dharamsala, India in 1959, the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts was established with his support to preserve the values of the Tibetan cultural tradition.

The Tibetan opera itself, which the Hungarian audience could experience for the first time, proved to be quite accessible for us. This is

probably to do with the fact that, despite its sacred theme, it is presented as an epic story, rather than as an abstraction like, for example, the Kathakali we saw earlier. The story of the 'sky-walking fairy' (as described by the performance) is reminiscent of Christ's in several respects, particularly in the way he rises to proclaim love in the world. Nangsa Obum's extraordinary journey on the Inner Path is presented in an abridged version of the opera, with spectacular dance scenes accompanied by beautiful tunes. Although the origins of the Tibetan people are considered uncertain by historians, they themselves, similarly to Hungarians, speak of their Scythian heritage, and they clearly came to their present-day realm of snow from a nomadic horse culture in Inner Asia. Their adoption of Buddhism was similar to our conversion to Christianity. In their case, Buddhism was added as a layer on top of their ancient nomadic-totemic beliefs, which resulted in religious syncretism. Anyone who has seen the Christmas Carol

with the Angel from Szentegyháza, Szekler Region, Romania, will know what this is about: a perfect fusion of pagan forms in a Christian story. Buddhist liturgy and the sacred tale of Nangsa Obum, who “was given to earth to liberate a hundred thousand sentient beings with her radiance”, chimes in beautifully with, for example, the circular dance of masked hunters, clearly a pagan heritage, in the shepherds’ circular dance at baby Jesus’ manger in the Szentegyháza Carol. And then there are the tingling pentatonic melodies, the singing techniques akin to Hungarian folk singing, and the exciting correspondences with traditional Hungarian costumes. In short, there were many points where we felt familiar with this now exotically distant culture.



The masked hunters’ circle dance

The Algerian Théâtre Sindjab/Sindjab Theatre Company’s production *The Sound of the Sand* presents the desert peoples’ rituals related to rain and water, which are so important to them. The company has already taken part in MITEM in recent years, and Omar Fetmouche’s production *Bravo to the Artist*, partly based on the director’s own experiences, has also come to Budapest. This time, he went deeper: he incorporated rituals from his region and his homeland. We learnt that the dialogue on theatre that started in Budapest in 2021 inspired him to formulate a theatrical message for his region. Omar Fetmouche also told the audience meeting about the 30,000-year-old stone engravings of dance moves found in the Sahara region in the heart of Algeria. These rock drawings also prove that the region has a very ancient culture with many ancient rites.

The first part of the production presented the mythical story of Anzar, the god of rain and water in Berber mythology, who is rejected by a maiden he chose and who, therefore, punishes people with drought. Water is the source of all life forms and is a particularly important element for the Saharan peoples, which is why these rites are also of particular importance, the director underlined. The second part depicted a Tuareg tribal battle



The Sound of the Sand, Sindjab Theatre Company, Algerien, d: Omar Fetmouche



The closing image of the performance

of Djanet in South-East Algeria. The ceremony, which takes place in a circular space, involves singing, dancing and dressing up in a contest of strength, where participants lay down their weapons, as during the ancient Greek Olympics, and compete in the field of arts. This rite has been on UNESCO's World Heritage List since 2014.

One of the curiosities of the meeting in the field of East-West dialogue was the contemporary Chinese adaptation of *Faust*, produced by Beijing's Central Academy of Drama. The Chinese creators (author Yang Zhankun and director Liu Libin), who significantly rewrote Goethe's work, chose an interesting dramaturgical solution: we follow the episodes of Faust's story in reversed sequence... Western-style rampant individualism, of which *Faust* is one of the first literary representations, is in sharp contrast with the predominantly collectivist approach of Asian societies and their humility in the face of community values. As the director pointed out, there are, however, links: 'In China, we tend to draw parallels between the title character in *Faust* (1832) and the Monkey King in *Journey to the West* (1592): both are folk-tale heroes, both have inspired many

and the rite of Sebiba (Sebeiba). The latter is a kind of artistic duel, an abstract version of tribal fighting that, according to Fetmouche, has been going on unchanged for a hundred years in the south of Algeria. Descriptions suggest that its origins go back to ancient times. It is believed that when Moses defeated Pharaoh, the two tribes of the Tassili n'Ajjer made peace, hence the annual event in the province

works and adaptations, both have been staged in many forms. The two stories illustrate the differences and complementarities between Chinese and Western cultures".

The Hungarian audience could, above all, marvel at the stylized elements of the performance. There was no real need for costume changes between scenes, one or two characteristic moves indicated the transitions, and this was especially well done by Xie Yuchuan playing Mephisto. The lead singer Yikesang



Yang Zhankun: *The Tragedy of Faust*, The Central Academy of Drama, Beijing, d: Liu Libin

Tayier (Faust), showed convincing dramatic prowess despite his young age, while Sun Jingfei (Gretchen) had a very fresh and natural stage presence. The musical eclecticism of the performance did not coalesce in a complete whole, a kind of old-school operatic style dominated the stage at times: the characters sang arias frontally, facing the audience directly. But the spectacle was beautiful and impressive, the circular rotating stage element suggesting that we humans essentially travel down the



Scene with the spiral curtain

same Faustian path. The spiral curtain above the circular element was also a key part of this simple but effective stage set (set designer: Sun Daqing), symbolising a higher level of the cycle: man's journey ever upwards, rising toward the sky.

There was also some real theatre magic in the East-West dialogue. On the Miklós Bánffy Stage of Eiffel Art Studio, we saw Silviu Purcărete's extraordinary Kabuki adaptation *The Scarlet Princess of Edo*, an irrevocable marriage of Japanese and Western European theatre.

This Japanese Kabuki classic written in 1817 by Tsuruya Nanboku IV. was luckily discovered by Romanian grand master Silviu Purcărete, who saw (not without reason) a kind of Shakespearean parallel, based on which he created his own theatrical vision. The story of Princess Sakura was a sensation in the Kabuki world of the Edo period with its decadently radiant beauty. This epic about soap opera-loads of love-passion-treachery-hatred-revenge was a sound basis for Master Purcărete on which to create a piquant, original masterpiece in his wizard lab. The *Scarlet Princess of Edo* had its world première at the 2018 Sibiu International Theatre Festival, and has since toured Brussels and Japan, where critics praised it as 'a European theatre genius's poetic homage to a Japanese classic' (Tokyo Festival 2022). Magic is truly the best word to describe the brilliant playfulness with which Purcărete handled this



The Scarlet Princess of Edo, Script by Silviu Purcărete, inspired from Sakura Hime Azuma Bunshō, by Tsuruya Namboku IV, Radu Stanca National Theatre of Sibiu, 2018, d: Silviu Purcărete



Ofelia Popii in one of her male roles (on the left)

Purcărete's most playful, intelligent, humorous and rich performance, 'a perfect harmony of East European sensibility and the Japanese spirit'.

According to the Romanian author, Kabuki has a lot in common with Shakespeare's plays, mainly because both are a particular mixture of tragedy and comedy. The Budapest audience could see this for themselves: it was really like watching a Shakespeare comedy and a traditional Japanese theatre performance at the same time. The Purcărete productions at MITEM (*Faust*, *Gulliver*, *The Tragedy of Man*) demonstrated the Romanian master's ability to forge a distinct signature style in his oeuvre. This unique East-West adaptation of *The Scarlet Princess of Edo* established a new genre: 'fusion theatre'. Silviu Purcărete is – no doubt – a genuine theatre wizard...

From the world of contemporary Mexican theatre, we were treated to three memorable and very different productions by Teatro de Babel and the Mexican National Theatre, the most exciting of which, in terms of theatrical form, was perhaps *Emiliano Zapata's Women*, written and directed by actress



Conchi León: *Emiliano Zapata's women*, Compañía Nacional de Teatro de México, Mexico City, 2020, d: Conchi León (source: mitem.hu)

and playwright Conchi León, about the 19th century Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. In a post-show discussion, Conchi León revealed that Zapata's story was really just an excuse for her to talk about women's issues, living in a society where 10-15 women are still killed every day and many disappear without a trace. In staging this current phenomenon rooted in the past, the authors seek a theatre language to dialogue with

Japanese critics had reason to describe the production as Silviu

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Japanese critics had reason to describe the production as Silviu

today's audiences, boldly mixing 19th-century romantic-heroic stories with archaic ritual theatre and modern political theatre on women's issues, using elemental playfulness and humour. There were excellent actors, including the director herself, along with Judith Inda and Karla Camarillo.

The other contemporary Mexican play also focused on women's issues. Written and directed by Aurora Cano based on Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, *Moscow* explored the subject of disengagement. Blending a contemporary sense of life with avant-garde forms and powerful poetic texts, the play focuses on three actresses who address issues around women's autonomy, emancipation and sexuality.. The dramatic conclusion is reached via a series of local and universal scenes: while the three sisters longing for Moscow end up lonely, here the young girl who wants to go to Montreal is shot just as brutally as the intellectual woman struggling with motherhood. The discussion following *The Fundamentalist*, based on Juha Joleka's play on the relationship between a successful priest having renewed his faith and his ex-mentee, a girl who subsequently joined a cult, was arguably more exciting than the performance itself.

'Mexico is a country of denial, torn apart by different identities, while their synthesis is also present,' – said one of their actors, Luís de Tavira. Aurora Cano explained that Mexico is characterised by a strong cultural syncretism, since, unlike the nomadic cultures European immigrants found in North America, Mexico had great empires at the time the European conquerors arrived. As Aurora Cano put it, 'When chocolate (a Nahuatl word) met cow's milk (cows are not native to the Americas), the world changed. That is also a metaphor for the meeting of cultures. Mexican culture is the result of the very intense encounter of Spanish culture, based on European values, with the ancient, often brutal, bloody, ritualistic local culture.'



Aurora Cano: *Moscow*, Teatro de Babel, Mexico City, 2020, d: Aurora Cano



Juha Joleka: *The fundamentalist*, Teatro de Babel, Mexico City, 2019, d: Ignacio García

Some foreign productions have not been mentioned yet, because they were, in a way, separate islands in the huge programme.

A case in point was the festival's opening performance, Theodoros Terzopoulos' *Nora*, based on Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. The Greek grand master of theatre told the audience meeting that he was looking for transformation and transcendence in the figure of Nora, a part of consumer society and prisoner in a relationship where she and her husband play a masochistic game. The transformation she undergoes is not only a story of liberation, but also a story of theatre and life itself, as constant change is at the heart of both. 'A still life is death,' – said the Greek master who believes that theatre, and art in general, can save the day precisely by granting us this transformation.

Young Barbarians, a production by the State Hungarian Theatre of Cluj, directed by Attila Vidnyánszky Jr. and written by Miklós Vecsei H., is an interdisciplinary cavalcade inspired by the lives of Bartók and Kodály. The production presented the trials and tribulations of the two emblematic



Based on *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen: *Nora*, Attis Theatre, Athens, 2019, d: Theodoros Terzopoulos



Inspired by the lives of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, based on a text by Miklós Vecsei H. and the improvisation of the company: *Young Barbarians*, State Hungarian Theatre of Cluj, 2022, d: Attila Vidnyánszky Jr.

Hungarian composers, especially Bartók, using an astonishing array of associations and ideas. In the course of just over three hours, the authors bombarded an unsuspecting audience with a barrage of impulse bombs, creating a uniquely poetic collective performance about a genius who happened to be very frail and fallible as a human being, but very full-bodied in his music, capable of unleashing 'barbaric' energy. Bartók, whose character is designed to amuse, is played (brilliantly) by a fragile woman, Éva Imre. This improvisation-based permanent intellectual vibrancy somehow still managed to evoke very profound experiences in the audience, opined the authors, and ascertained the spectators in the auditorium.

Emma Dante brought yet another astonishingly human story to Budapest. After her latest hit *Misericordia*, the Italian director

returned to MITEM with *Blackcaps' Tango*, an Atto Unico co-production with several partners. In this production, the author presented an accurate psychological roadmap of a couple's relationship, using a fascinating flashback technique to tell the story backwards in time, starting with the end. A lonely end, as one of the characters (in this case, she) is left alone after her partner's death and recalls their shared experiences, in reverse order. First come the challenges of old age, then the middle-aged couple are 'bored' in front of the TV, then their child is born, then the wedding, how they became a couple, and finally, how they first met. Demonstrating how two people can live together a whole life long, if they choose well and stay by each other's side. Because such cases do exist. Manuela Lo Sicco and Sabino Civilleri beautifully captured the euphoria of the simplest, most ordinary moments of life and the awkwardness hidden in some of its highlight moments – such is our life.

Finally, special mention should be made of a spiritual foreign production brought to MITEM by France's international superstar Juliette Binoche. Excerpts from Gitta Mallász's book *Talking with Angels* were staged as a reading performance entitled *The Matter of Light*. With the help of the French actress and Nelli Szűcs, Zsuzsa Varga and Zsolt Trill, the mystical events of 80 years ago came to life, teaching four young people about faith, love, and their mission in life. The author alone survived the inferno of the Second World War and took her notes to France, where the book was finally published thanks to Gyöngyi Kardos. Originally written in Hungarian, it has since been translated into 25 languages and is now part of Hungarian literature.



Emma Dante: *Blackcaps' tango / Il tango delle capinere*, Sud Costa Occidentale, Palermo, 2023, d: Emma Dante



The matter of light, a reading performance – based on the book *Talking with Angels*, National Theatre Budapest, 2023, d: Wajdi Mouawad

All photos were taken by Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhas.hu
Translated by László Vértes



mitem



YU. M. LOTMAN

The House in *The Master and Margarita*¹

Is this house really a house?

Is this how people should live?

Alexander Blok

Soviet-Russian literary scholar Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman (1922–1993) became known worldwide as the founder of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics. In the second part of this study on symbolic spaces, the spatial structure of Bulgakov's novel is approached from the function of the "house". According to Lotman, the full spectrum of the symbolism of the "house" is present in this work. An example of the lively, culture-creating medium of the protective home of one's own is the new flat of the Master working on his novel. The life-threatening locations of the anti-life and anti-culture exterior world come as a contrast: the underworld "counter-houses" and "pseudo-houses" of Moscow in the 1930s, including the Griboedov House and the madhouse, which deprive the better-off characters (Margarita, Ivan) of their home and make them flee. At the same time, the lack of personal space is also related, as the author points out, to the general housing shortage which forces the inhabitants of the capital to fight fiercely for the living space of the dead. The semiotic examination of fictional space initiated by Lotman can undoubtedly be inspiring for theatre creators, directors, and scenographers as well. The publication of this study is made relevant by the fact that the theatrical adaptation of the novel, directed by Aleksandar Popovski and presented at the National Theatre in Budapest in September 2021, is included in the showcase section of this year's MITEM 10.

¹ This is an abridged version of the paper in Russian, based on its Hungarian translation by Gyöngyi Heltai. Cf. Заметки о художественном пространстве: 1. Путешествие Улисса в «Божественной комедии» Данте; 2. Дом в «Мастере и Маргарите» // Учен. зап. Тарт. гос. ун-та. 1986. Вып. 720. С. 25–43. (Труды по знаковым системам. [Т.] 19: Семиотика пространства и пространство семиотики.)

The juxtaposition of the 'house', i.e. one's own, safe, cultured place protected by the gods and the 'anti-house', the 'forest hut', i.e. a strange, cursed place, a venue of temporary death where to enter is to travel to the world beyond the grave, is an important universal theme in world folklore. Ancient models of consciousness based on this opposition have persisted with great tenacity and fertility throughout the history of culture. In Pushkin's poetry of the late 1820s and 1930s, the theme of the House becomes an ideological centre that embraces ideas of cultural tradition, history, human dignity and responsibility. In Gogol's oeuvre, this theme takes the form of a juxtaposition between the House and its opposite, i.e. the cursed anti-house (the brothel and the office in his *Petersburg Tales*); homelessness and being on the Road as highest values are juxtaposed to the reclusive egotism of a house-bound life. In Dostoevsky's stories, the mythological archetype is combined with the Gogolesque tradition: the hero – the inhabitant of holes or coffin-rooms (i.e. places of death themselves) – must first pass through the house of the dead, 'compensating death with death', in order to be resurrected and reborn.

This tradition is extremely important in Bulgakov's writings, as the Anti-house is a key symbol running through his entire oeuvre. This outline of a treatise will examine the function of this motif in *Master and Margarita*.

The first thing that strikes us is that the only figure who is present throughout the novel and is eventually christened 'the disciple', is 'Ivan Nikolayevich Ponyrev, who wrote under the pseudonym of Homeless'. Yeshua also appears in a similar context.

'Where is your permanent residence?' (concerning registration and identity cards, a constant theme for the novel's characters – Ju. L.)

'"I have no permanent home," the prisoner answered shyly, "I travel from town to town."'

'"That can be put more briefly, in a word – a vagrant," the procurator said.'

It is notable that immediately afterwards, Yeshua is accused of seeking 'to destroy the temple building'; and that Ivan gets himself an address: 'It's the poet Homeless speaking from the madhouse...'.

Parallel to the theme of homelessness, the motif of the false house also appears. Its most important version is the communal apartment. Foka's comment 'One can also dine at home' is answered thus, 'I can imagine your wife, in the communal kitchen at home, trying to do perch au naturel to order in a saucepan!' The concepts of 'house'



Erika Latigan: *Ivan the Homeless in the mental hospital*, linocut, 50x33 cm, 2011 (source: arts.in.ua)

and ‘communal kitchen’ are in principle incompatible in Bulgakov’s work, and it is precisely their coexistence that conjures up a fantastic world. The abnormality of the world is concentrated in the home. It is where the pranks of the forces of the underworld, the mystique of the office and everyday squabbles intersect. Just as the novel’s swearwords involving the devil have a double-entendre, i.e. they are expletives and genuine references² at the same time, the ‘home-related’ double talk also has absurd or underworldly connotations. For example, in the case of ‘one must not settle in the deceased one’s half’ (one must not stay in the rooms previously occupied by the late Berlioz), the housing cooperative jargon is accompanied by the eerie image of Korovyov sitting in the deceased Berlioz’s part (the meaning of which is emphasized further by the story of Berlioz’s stolen head and the removal of Bengalsky’s).³

The fact that home here is not a place for life, but for something contrary to it, is demonstrated by the strong link between the themes of home and death. The word ‘apartment’ appears for the first time in the novel in a very ominous



Nelli Levental: Set design for the stage adaptation of *The Master and Margarita*, paper cutout, 2016 (source: masterandmargarita.eu)

context: after Woland has predicted Berlioz’s death, he is asked ‘“But ... where are you going to live?” “In your apartment.”’ This theme is developed further in Korovyov’s words to Nikanor Ivanovich: ‘It’s all the same to him – the deceased – you must agree, Nikanor Ivanovich ... He doesn’t need the apartment now, does he?’ Then Berlioz’s uncle arrives in Moscow to ‘get himself registered’ ... in ‘his late nephew’s three rooms’. The nephew’s death becomes an episode in the solution to the housing problem: ‘The telegram staggered Maximilian

Andreevich. This was a moment it would be sinful to let slip. Practical people know that such moments do not come twice.’ The relative’s death is becomes a favourable moment not to be missed.

Infernal things are taking place in apartment no. 50, but the troubles began way before Woland and his entourage moved in, as the jeweller’s widow’s apartment

² Woland: ‘I’m telling you, he’s capricious as devil knows what!’, Likhodeev: ‘He’s already gone, gone!’ the interpreter cried. (...) He’s already devil knows where!’, ‘Get him out of here, devil take me! And that one, imagine, smiles and says: “Devil take you? That, in fact, can be done!”’

³ Cf. Koroviev’s soliloquy: ‘I was a witness. Believe me – bang! and the head’s gone! Crunch – there goes the right leg! Crunch – there goes the left leg!’

has always had a 'strange reputation'. The 'miraculous disappearances' do not, however, make this apartment unique, since the key feature of the 'anti-houses' in the novel is precisely that instead of living in them, people disappear from them (they run away, fly away, leave, vanishing without a trace). The irrational role of the apartment in the novel is underlined by the parallel narrative that, on the one hand, 'for someone well acquainted with the fifth dimension, it costs nothing to expand space to the desired proportions' and on the other, 'one city-dweller' ... 'transformed a three-room apartment' ... 'without any fifth dimension or other things that addle the brain, into a four-room apartment' and 'exchanged that one for two separate apartments in different parts of Moscow: one of three rooms, the other of two (...) and you keep talking about the fifth dimension!'

The irrational contradictions of the general hunt for 'living space' – Poplavsky's attempt at 'exchanging an apartment on Institutsky Street in Kiev for smaller quarters in Moscow' – make sense of both the mock conventionality of the housing office jargon, and the unreality of the act itself – to 'live somewhere' is to settle on the deceased, and the incompatibility of this notion with life is finally underlined in Bulgakov's plea 'Give me my head, give me back my head ... Take my apartment (...) only give me back my head!'

Bulgakov's apartment is intended to give the impression of being uninhabited. In house no. 13(!) that Ivan, chasing Woland, ran into, 'He did not have to wait long. Some little girl of about five opened the door for Ivan and, without asking him anything, immediately went away somewhere.'

'In the huge, extremely neglected front hall, weakly lit by a tiny carbon arc lamp under the high ceiling, black with grime, a bicycle without tyres hung on the wall, a huge iron-bound trunk stood, and on a shelf over the coat rack a winter hat lay, its long ear-flaps hanging down. Behind one of the doors, a resonant male voice was angrily shouting something in verse from a radio set.'

It is here that Ivan "stumbles into 'the 'naked citizeness', in the 'infernal light (...) of the coals smouldering in the boiler.'

At the same time, the characteristics that distinguish a house from an anti-house are not limited to the unkempt, neglected or unkept nature of communal



Sergei Alyev: Scene illustration for the animated film *The Master and Margarita*, 1995 (source: arslonga.ru)



Yuri Chistyakov: *Jesus and Pilate in the portico*, 1998 (source: litvinovs.net)

housing. 'Margarita Nikolaevna knew nothing of the horrors of life in a communal apartment', but she senses that in a 'villa' one can only die, not live. Pontius Pilate, similarly, loathes Herod's palace, living, eating and sleeping in the portico, and even in the midst of a hurricane, he does not have the strength to retreat to the palace ['I cannot spend my nights in it']. During the course of the novel Pilate enters the palace only once – 'the procurator met, in a room shielded from the sun by dark curtains, with a certain man, whose face was half covered by a hood'. The rooms are not inhabited, but are used for meetings, as it were, with the head of the secret service. Afranius and Nisa 'disappeared into the house' to agree on a price for killing Judas ('to put a knife into a

man with the help of a woman, one needs very big money'). The stories of the poisoners, murderers and traitors in Satan's ball refer to various rooms that play a more and more sombre role. After 'the news of Berlioz's death spread through the whole house with a sort of supernatural speed', 'Nikanor Ivanovich received thirty-two (...) declarations (...) containing claims' to Berlioz's three rooms on some grounds, 'they contained pleas, threats, libels, denunciations'. The apartment thus becomes synonymous with something sinister, primarily denunciation. The desire for an apartment was also the motivation for Aloisy Mogarich to denounce the master.

'"Mogarych?" Azazello asked of the one fallen from the sky.

"Aloisy Mogarych," the man answered, shivering. "Was it you who, after reading Latunsky's article about this man's novel, wrote a denunciation saying that he kept illegal literature?" asked Azazello.

The newly arrived citizen turned blue and dissolved in tears of repentance.

"You wanted to move into his rooms?" Azazello twanged as soulfully as he could." '

The 'housing problem' thus becomes a symbol with a broad connotation. '...ordinary people... In general, reminiscent of the former ones ... only the housing problem has corrupted them...', Woland sums up.

However, it is not only the apartment that represents the anti-house in the novel. The fate of the heroes is intertwined with many houses, the most

important of which are Griboedov's and the madhouse. 'A little log structure – a separate kitchen, a bathhouse, devil knows what it was!', 'What a hellish place for a living man!' – this is where Margarita sees the master in her dream. Gribojedov's is extremely relevant, since in this case, the meaning traditionally associated with the house throughout the history of culture undergoes a complete travesty. Here everything is shown to be a lie, from the inscription 'Apply to M. V. Spurioznaya.' (Russian: 'podlozhny' meaning false, forged) to the 'totally incomprehensible inscription: "Perelygino" '.

Characteristically, sentences in the novel are carried out on the premises that are elevated to the level of symbols: Margarita 'punishes' the apartments (but protects Latunsky from Woland's entourage), Korovyov and Behemoth set fire to Griboedov's.

The underground nature of the false houses also applies to their interconnected version, the city. At the beginning and end of the novel, the houses of the city are seen fading into twilight. Woland 'rested his glance on the upper floors, where the glass dazzlingly reflected the broken-up sun which was for ever departing from Mikhail Alexandrovich'. In Chapter 29 of Book Two, 'the two on the terrace gazed at the fragmented, dazzling sunlight in the upper-floor windows of the huge buildings facing west. Woland's eye burned like one of those windows, though Woland had his back to the sunset'. The comparison with Woland's eyes lends the glaring window panes an ominous meaning, associating their glow with the novel's oft-mentioned glowing coals. Glittering windows in the novel generally refer to the anti-world. Bulgakov juxtaposes the living Houses with the false-living anti-Houses, among other ways, by means of repetitive light and acoustic signals. Thus, the sound of a gramophone is heard from the anti-house ('a gramophone was playing in my rooms', the master says of the night in January when he went to his basement apartment – occupied by Aloisy Mogarich – in his coat 'with the buttons torn off') and the same radio broadcast plays everywhere. The House, on the other hand, is characterised by the sound of the piano. The dual nature of apartment no. 50 is indicated by the alternating sounds of the gramophone and the piano coming from it.

Bulgakov, who uses the language of space to express non-spatial concepts, makes the House (Home) a vehicle of spiritual elevation, rich in inner culture, creativity and love. The degrees of spiritual elevation are arranged in the writer's strict hierarchy: at the lowest level is lifeless spirituality, and at the opposite end is absolute spiritual elevation. The former needs a living space, as opposed to a house, but the latter does not need a house either; nor does Yeshua, whose entire earthly existence is a ceaseless journey, a life on the road. Pontius Pilate, too, always sees himself walking on moonbeams in his happy dreams.

Between these extremes lies the broad and ambiguous sphere of life. At the lower levels, we encounter devilish, cruel pranks that harass and mock the dull,

soulless world and disrupt its order through irony and sarcasm. These wicked amusements shake up whoever they can, and ultimately spur them on to a higher level of spirituality. It is in this light that Goethe's motto, with its slightly Manichean connotations, is to be understood: "Who the art thou? / Part of that power which still / Produceth good, whilst ever scheming ill."

Art is placed above that. It is entirely human, it does not rise to the level of the absolute (the master does not deserve the light). At the same time, its representatives are higher in the hierarchy than Woland's physically stronger servants or figures like Afranius, with all their creativity. This higher degree of spirituality, from the point of view that interests us, is expressed spatially in the novel. On arrival in Moscow, Woland and his entourage settle in an apartment. Aphranius and Pilate meet in the courtyard while the master needs a House. The search for a house (home) is a fitting point of view from which to describe the master's journey.

The master's journey is a process – of wandering.

His story can be seen as a series of distinct transitions from one space to another. It all begins with winning a hundred thousand roubles, when our hero turns from a museum employee and translator into a writer and master. After winning the jackpot, 'the man in the black cap' did the following: he bought a lot of books (an indispensable feature of the House, and indicates not only spiritual elevation but also a spiritual home – Yu. L.), 'gave up his room on

Myasnitskaya ... "Ohh, that accursed hole! ..." he growled'.

The master 'rented (...) two rooms in the basement of a little house in the garden'.

"Ah, that was a golden age!" the narrator whispered, his eyes shining. "A completely private little apartment, plus a front hall with a sink in it," he underscored for some reason with special pride (...) "And in my stove a fire was eternally blazing! (...) and in the first room – a huge room, one hundred and fifty square feet! – books, books and the stove" '.

The master's new residence is a 'small apartment'. But it is not the sink in the hallway that makes it a House (Home), but



Photo illustration from the retroatelier project (2011–2013) of the internet journal livejournal.com (source: livejournal.com)

the cosy atmosphere of culture. For Bulgakov, as for Pushkin in the 1830s, culture is inseparable from a kind of cosy, intimate life. The process of writing the novel transforms his basement apartment into a lyrical Home (House), of which Griboyedov's is the opposite, where, far from the shy, intimate atmosphere of culture, 'there is now ripening', 'like pineapples in a greenhouse', 'the future author of a *Don Quixote* or a *Faust*' and 'one of them, for starters, offers the reading public *The Inspector General* or, if worse comes to worst, *Evgeny Onegin*.' As soon as the master abandoned the work, the House was transformed into a depressing basement: 'I'm broken, I'm bored, and I want to be in the basement.' Woland sums it up, 'And so, the man who wrote the story of Pontius Pilate goes to the basement with the intention of settling by the lamp and leading a beggarly existence?'

But the master will still have his House.

'"Listen to the stillness," Margarita said to the master, and the sand rustled under her bare feet, "listen and enjoy what you were not given in life – peace. Look, there ahead is your eternal home, which you have been given as a reward. I can already see the Venetian window and the twisting vine, it climbs right up to the roof. Here is your home, your eternal home."'

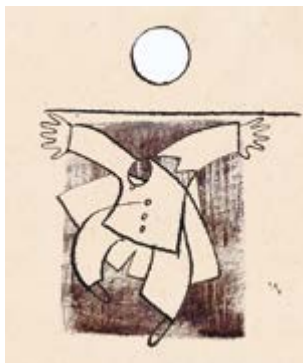
Having left behind the ordeal of false houses and houses of sorrow ('a hellish place for a living man') and also flight (flight: a permanent 'requisite' of leaving the world of apartments), the master finds an intimate home and a life imbued with culture and love, from which cruelty has been removed by the intellectual efforts of previous generations.

'I know that in the evenings you will be visited by those you love, those who interest you and who will never trouble you. They will play for you, they will sing for you, you will see what light is in the room when the candles are burning. You will fall asleep, having put on your greasy and eternal nightcap, you will fall asleep with a smile on your lips.'



Mihail Bulgakov: *The Master and Margarita*, National Theatre, Budapest, 2021, d: Aleksandar Popovski (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)

Translated by László Vértés



MÁRTON P. GULYÁS

Shrinking Spaces

New mediality in *Woyzeck* at Budapest's National Theatre

The relationship and interaction between cinema and theatre has been the subject of lively discussions since the beginning of film history, says the author. Behind the diversity of approaches two basic types are to be discovered. One is based on the assumption that there is no communication between the mediums of film and theatre (for example Grotowski, the young György Lukács or Robert Bresson stood for this). The other type includes approaches according to which the two art forms can enrich each other, form a synthesis, borrow formal elements, and, moreover, the alloy of the two may bring new qualities into being; it is represented by for instance Eisenstein, Alain Resnais, Fellini, Fassbinder, Hans Jürgen Syberberg and Greenaway. The author quotes Hans-Thies Lehmann, who said that the new form of theatre discourse developed in the 1970s, when the media flooded everyday life and their presence became permanent. He points out that the changes in our relationship to reality (so our sense of space and time) have most effectively been formulated by French philosophers Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard. According to Baudrillard, we have come to the age of hyperrealism: the relationship between the original and the copy has lost balance, signs and images have become the primary reality. Paul Virilio believes that the space of freedom is shrinking with a rise in speed, and beyond a certain limit, the dictatorship of movement sets in. After the theoretical discussion of the subject, the author of the article mentions those productions at this year's MITEM (*The Marriage of Figaro...*; *Alice*; *EzMi*) which used the tools of the new mediality. Then he gives a detailed analysis of *Woyzeck* directed by Attila Vidnyánszky Jnr to conclude that this interpretation of Büchner's piece, above all, holds up a mocking glass to the state of the world described by Baudrillard and Virilio.

“What is the theatre? What is unique about it? What can it do that film and television cannot?” – the question was raised by Jerzy Grotowski in the 1960s, but this issue is probably even more topical today in the era of the internet with all the flurry of motion pictures and advertisements. Of course, the relationship between film and theatre, as well as their interaction, have been the subject of intense debate since the beginning of film history. Theatre and film professionals, art historians, theorists have expressed their ideas about the connection of the two media.¹ In my view, there are two basic types of opinion behind the diversity of approaches.

One is based on the assumption that there is no reciprocal passage between the media of film and that of the theatre, for they represent something different in their essence, and for their “mission”, their “genius” is different. If a film becomes “theatre-like” or a theatre performance turns “cinematic”, then its artistic values get reduced. Grotowski himself took this position, he did not accept theatre as “the synthesis of different artistic branches such as literature, fine arts, painting, lighting effects, acting,” and he opposed the fashionable “rich theatre” of that time to “poor theatre”:

“What is Rich Theatre? The Rich Theatre depends on artistic kleptomania. (...) By multiplying assimilated elements, the Rich Theatre tries to escape the impasse presented by movies and television. Since film and TV excel in the area of the mechanical functions (montage, instantaneous change of place, etc.), the Rich Theatre countered with a blatantly compensatory call for «total theatre». The integration of borrowed mechanisms (movie screens on stage, for example) means a sophisticated technical plant, permitting great mobility and dynamism. (...) No matter how much theater expands and exploits its mechanical resources, it will remain technologically inferior to film and television. Consequently, I propose poverty in theatre. We have resigned from the stage-and-auditorium plant, simply an empty room was indispensable: for each production, a new space is designed for the actors and spectators. Thus, infinite variation of performer-audience relationships is possible.”²

Of course, many people before Grotowski came to similar conclusions as well. A good example of this is an early study by György Lukács, which starts with the statement that cinema today (in the 1910s) is perceived by many as a new and cheap competitor to theatre. This perception, in his view, is fundamentally wrong, which he justifies as follows:

¹ A good compilation in Hungarian can be found in the following volume: János Kenedi (ed.): *A film és a többi művészet*. [=Film and the Other Arts.] Bp. Gondolat Publisher, 1977. pp. 249–381.

² Jerzy Grotowski: *Színház és rituálé*. [=Theatre and Ritual.] Bratislava – Budapest, Pesti Kalligram, 1999. pp. 13–14. English edition: Jerzy Grotowski: *Towards a Poor Theatre*, preface by Peter Brook, published by Simon and Schuster, New York, 1968, pp. 19–20.

“...The root of theatrical effects relies neither in the words, nor in the gestures of an actor, nor in the events of the play, but in the power by which a living person, the live will of a live man, overflows directly and without inhibitory referral to an equally live mass. (...) The presence, the actor’s ‘being here’ expresses in a most tangible, and therefore in the most profound way, that the people in the drama were consecrated by fate. Because to be present, that is, to live in reality, to live exclusively and most intensely, in itself equals the fate – the so-called ‘life’ never can reach the life-intensity which could raise everything into the sphere of destiny. (...) The absence of this ‘presence’ is an essential feature of ‘the cinema’. (...) It is not a deficiency in the cinema, but it is its boundary, it is its principium stilisationis. (...) The essence of ‘cinema’ is the intrinsic movement, the eternal variability, the never-ending transformation of things. (...) Thus, everything that was oppressed by the abstract monumental weight of destiny, flourishes into a rich and sprawling life. (...) It is here that the liveliness of nature gains an artistic form first: the splashing of water, the blowing of wind among trees, the silence of the sunset, the rage of the thunderstorm here will turn into art in their quality as natural processes, (unlike in painting – where they do so via their picturesque values obtained from another world).”

Meanwhile Lukács believes that the cinema – indirectly – may have a positive effect on the development of theatre, because “it has the ability to make everything more efficient, and still in a much finer manner, that falls into the category of entertainment and can be made more visible than in the pulpit stage.” Therefore “if once – and here I am talking about the aim of the very distant but deep desires of those who take drama seriously – the entertaining stage literature gets eliminated by this competitor, then the stage will again be forced to deal with what its real vocation is: with great *tragedy* and great *comedy*.”³

It was the film director Robert Bresson who formulated the essence of this approach perhaps in the most compact way: “No marriage of theatre and cinematography without both being exterminated. (...) The truth of cinematography cannot be the truth of theatre, not the truth of the novel nor the truth of painting. (What the cinematographer captures with his or her own resources cannot be what the theatre, the novel, painting captures with theirs).”⁴

Approaches of the second type state that the two art forms can enrich one another, synthesize each other, take on the tools of the form language, and

³ Lukács György: *Gondolatok a mozi esztétikájáról*. [= *Thoughts about the Aesthetics of Cinema*.] In. Lukács György: *Ifjúkori művek*. [= *Youth Works*.] Bp., Magvető, 1977. pp. 594–601.

⁴ Robert Bresson: *Feljegyzések a filmművészetéről*. Bp., Osiris Kiadó, 1998. pp. 10–11. [= *Notes sur le Cinématographe*]. Paris, Gallimard 1975. English edition: Robert Bresson: *Notes on the Cinematographer*, Translated from the French by Jonathan Griffin. Green Integer. Kobenhavn, 1977. p. 20.

even the alloying combination of the two can create new quality. According to André Bazin, “there have been significant interactions between different arts, at least at some stage in their development. The idea of ‘pure art’ is a preconceived notion of relatively modern concepts of criticism.”⁵ Thus, both film and theatre can win by putting their peculiarities in the service of the other art form.

There are many examples that justify the validity of these approaches. The first unified film style, German expressionism, took many formal elements from Max Reinhardt’s expressionist theatre.⁶ It cannot be ignored that Eisenstein, one of the main pioneers of the montage theory, began his career as a theatre director working as Mejerhold’s disciple. In his theoretical writings he followed the so-called mimetic traditions, i.e. he considered film and theatre to be a spectacle, designed for the viewer.⁷ In his first theatre production of *Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man* (*Ha всякого мудреца довольно простоты*) by Ostrovsky (1923), the actors were wearing clown costumes and playing in a biomechanical style. In this performance he projected his first film, entitled *Glumov’s Diary* (*Glumovs Tagebuch*), at the end of which he bowed in front of the camera, in a similar way as it was customary for actors in the theatre to

⁵ André Bazin: *Színház és film*. In: André Bazin: *Mi a film?* Bp., Osiris Kiadó, 1995. pp. 137. A. B.: *Théâtre et cinéma*. In: A. B.: *Qu’est-ce qu’un film?* Paris, Cerf, 1976. English edition: André Bazin: *Theatre and Cinema*. In: A. B.: *What is Cinema?* Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1967.

⁶ “The distorted shapes, the strong light-shadow contrasts, the broken planes, the mechanized movements have been transferred from the expressionist art and the scenery of the theatre.” András Bálint Kovács: *Metropolis, Párizs*. Bp., Képzőművészeti Kiadó, 1992. pp. 40–41.

⁷ In his book *Narration in the Fiction Film* David Bordwell describes several experiments with Eisenstein in which the Russian director tried to combine film and theatre: “In 1924 Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kulesov began to design a rehearsal room in which they would train actors for film. The building itself was paradoxical, because it was intended to be a theatre that goes beyond the legacy of the theatre. The main stage stood in the middle, and two stages on the sides. The middle one was a rotating stage. The audience was situated in a disc-shaped auditorium, which was able to rotate, so as to turn the spectators towards the scene in the right moment. The walls were removable in order to let the outside landscape be revealed, if necessary. There was a bridge from the main stage to the auditorium, so the actors could play in “close-up premier plan”. Even a conveyor belt was installed, on which the actors could run locally, or could “pan away” aside in front of the audience. In short, although this “filmed” rehearsal room possessed all perspectivic laws of the traditional stage, its designers modified it according to the contemporary filming habits. Eisenstein performed similar experiments in the directors’ class of the State Film Institute. Once he was about to stage a play in a traditional theatre space, he designed very sophisticated stage machines, though he could have had the desired effects in the cinema much easier.” English edition: David Bordwell: *Narration in the Fiction Film*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. In Hungarian: David Bordwell: *Elbeszélés a játékfilmben*. Bp., Magyar Filmintézet, 1996. pp. 25–26.

bow for the audience. Eisenstein elaborated his famous theory of “montage of attractions” originally for the film, and not for the theatre. As he writes, “Any aggressive manifestation of the theatre, that is, any element that exposes the viewer to such a sensory or psychological effect which is empirically verified and which mathematically calculates the emotional shocks of the recipient – is an attraction (from the point of view of the theatre).”⁸

According to András Bálint Kovács, “the theatre was the main inspiration for the late modern film, and this effect determined the stylistic surface of many modern films, as well”,⁹ so “theatrical forms” can be considered as a separate stylistic category. Films by artists such as Alain Resnais, Fellini, Fassbinder and Hans Jürgen Syberberg can be listed here. The two main features of this style are the exaggerated or abstract acting, and the importance of the artificiality



András Bálint Kovács
(photo: András Dér, source: nyugat.hu)

of the scenery, and that of the expressive lighting. – The reason for the appearance of theatrical forms is that the formal conventions of the art film (directing, spatial arrangement) have again lost their credibility, and “the film sought to renew its forms again from outside sources only. (...) Finding the renovation of film in creating the theatrical film style is a typically modernist response to the crisis. Relying on theatre directing is the creation of markers that can be transferred to the film to renew the film markers”.¹⁰ In contrast

in postmodern films (their most important forerunner is Fellini’s *E la nave va* (*And The Ship Sails On*), the their most mature pieces are perhaps the works by Greenaway made in the early 1990s, such as *Prospero’s Books* or *The Baby of Macon*, “we are witnessing the continuous intertwining of various aesthetic marking systems – film, theatre, painting, text. (...) The meaning is created through a transtextual series of markers, where each series is media-specific in itself, but the meaning created by them loses its original relationship with its own unique medial environment.”¹¹

⁸ Szergej Mihajlovics Eisenstein: *Válogatott tanulmányok.* [=Selected Studies.] Bp., Áron Kiadó, 1998. p. 59. Сергей Михайлович Эйзенштейн: *Избранные исследования* [=Sergei Mikhaylovits Eisenstein: *Izbrannye islebovaniya.*] Искусство, 1964. English edition: Sergei Eisenstein: *Notes of a film director*, translated by X. Danko. Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1959

⁹ András Bálint Kovács: *A modern film irányzatai.* [=Trends in Modern Film.] Bp., Palatinus, 2005. p. 210.

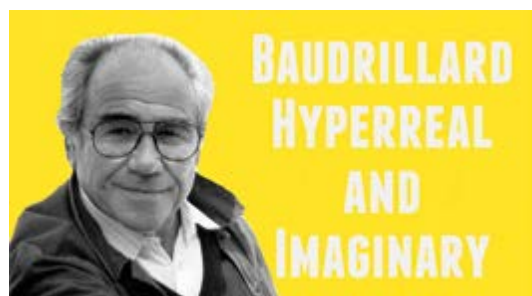
¹⁰ Ibid., p. 217.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 218.

According to Hans-Thies Lehmann, who elaborated the theory of post-dramatic theatre, the appearance of the new form of theatrical discourse can be dated to 1970s, when the media completely inundated everyday life and their presence became permanent.¹² The rapid development of mass media equipment radically changed the common perception of space and time, and this change was not left unanswered in the various branches of art – which was often realized by extending the boundaries of the media, quoting Yvette Bíró's expression “by means of non-forbidden border crossings”. It can be said that the adequate expression of postmodern (and post-postmodern) age is the hybridization of different art forms and means.

It was Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard, French philosophers, who most effectively drew up the changes of our relationship with reality (such as our sense of space and time). According to Baudrillard, we entered the era of hyperrealistic representation: the relationship between original and copy overturned, signs and images grew to primary reality. The world is flooded by simulacrum, which are no longer mere copies, since there are no “original” behind them. In a late essay he describes our age as a “post-orgy state” – we are beyond all kinds of revolution, all kinds of liberation and emancipatory endeavors which have never ever fulfilled our hope, never ever led to the revaluation of values:

“We can now only simulate orgy and liberation, at most we can pretend as if we were moving in an unchanged direction with an accelerated speed, but in fact we are accelerating in emptiness, because all the goals of liberation are behind us, and we are suffering from knowing that all results are known in advance, for we are in the possession of every sign, every form, every desire. (...) The glorious movement of modernity has not led to the transformation of all values as we had been dreaming about, but to the dispersion and atrophy of values, and the result of all this for us is the total chaos, that we can no longer grasp the idea of defining things either aesthetically, sexually, or politically. (...) Art has failed – following the aesthetic utopia of modern times – to become an ideal way of life (it did not have to exceed itself in the direction of any kind of completeness because this completeness is present here in religion already). It has got vanished not in any kind of transcendent idealism, but in the general aestheticism of everyday



Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) talking about ‘hyperreal and imaginary’ (source: youtube.com)

¹² Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Posztdramatikus színház*. Bp., Balassi Kiadó, 2009. pp. 17. Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Postdramatisches Theater*. Verlag der Autoren, 2005. English edition: Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Postdramatic Theatre*. Routledge; 2006.



Paul Virilio in 2010 (photo: Caroline Dumoucel, source: vice.com)

life, it ceased to exist so as to hand over its place to the mere spreading of images in the quotidian transesthetics.”¹³

In his essays Paul Virilio analyzes the consequences of social acceleration (regarding transport, telecommunication and war). According to him, the acceleration in speed brought about decisive changes in our spacial awareness as well:

“... If we shrink the world, if everything is within reach, then (...) we will be infinitely unhappy because we have lost the true place of freedom, the spaciousness. (...) An area without temporality is no longer an area, but its illusion. It is urgent to raise awareness of the political repercussions of such space-time-management, because they

are *fearful*. The space of freedom is shrinking with speed. However, freedom needs space. (...) Before, freedom of movement was thought to lead to infinite freedom. I show that this is not true; beyond a certain limit, the dictatorship of movement occurs; the self-exhausting, tormenting offensive. (...) We will still be considerably far from each other in space, but through audio-visual and transport equipments we will be forced to go to crowds and overcrowdings, which will reduce the world to anything which equals nothing.”¹⁴

* * *

In *Woyzeck*, directed by Attila Vidnyánszky Jr, the creators achieve a cinematic, film-like effect by mere theatrical means. There is no projected motion picture in the performance, there is only one TV screen, but with its back to the audience, so we, the spectators, do not see what is on – and still yes, we do,

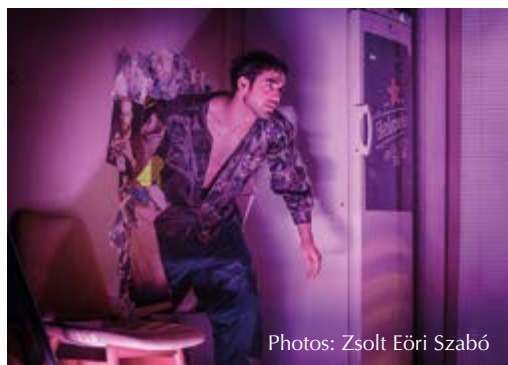
¹³ Jean Baudrillard: *A rossz transzparenciája*. [= *The Transparency of Evil*.] Bp., Balassi Kiadó, 1997. p. 16. Jean Baudrillard: *La transparencia del mal*. Galilée, 1990. English edition: Jean Baudrillard: *The Transparency of Evil*. Verso, 1993.

¹⁴ Paul Virilio – Sylvère Lotringer: *Tiszta háború* [= *Pure War*.] In: Tillmann J. A. (ed.): *A későújkor józansága, II.* [= *Soberness of the late New Age. vol. II.*] Bp., Göncöl Kiadó, 2004. pp. 204–206. Paul Virilio – Sylvère Lotringer: *Pure War*. Routledge, 2007. There is a good summary in Hungarian, of social acceleration and the theoretical reflections about it: Márk Horváth – Ádám Lovász: *Felbomlás és dromokrácia – társadalmi gyorsulás a modernitásban és a posztmodernitásban* [= *Disintegration and Dromocracy – Social Acceleration in Modernity and Postmodernity*.] Bp., Dialóg Campus Kiadó, 2016.

because the flash-and-blood actors enter the stage from it (literally). From now on, the performance gets a carnival-like touch, TV show parodies (advertisements, talk-shows, news, cooking programs) alternate with scenes of the *Woyzeck* drama, characters enter from the wall, or from the fridge – as if they were consumer goods.

It is customary to regard it as a form language characteristic of the film that (as opposed to theatre) the spectator, due to camera movements and cuts, does not feel the marge of the space. He can “move” freely within the borderlines, the space outside the picture frame being part of his “cognitive map”, thus his perception feeling is much closer to everyday experience. Following the performance of *Woyzeck*, we will enjoy a film-like experience, thanks to the scenery and the imaginative design of the playground, and we really will get closer to the everyday perception

– to the perception of our over-mediated hyper-realistic world (sometimes even too close, being confronted with its exaggerated, parodistic image). The auditorium is also housed in a closed space inside the theatre: we must enter a “room” in *Woyzeck*’s house. On entering we get outside simultaneously: the two sides of the auditorium is a part of the scenery showing the outside surface of the block’s walls (padded with newspaper) with windows and doors where the actors enter and exit. (The two sidewalls do not run parallel, so the space seems “shrinking”, through this our feeling gets reinforced that we are part of the events, we are “panders”). So the performance begins the way the exposure in a movie is built up: first they show us the environment in LS-s (wide angle long shots), and then the first scene begins. Later on we see the house even in a much further “plan”: *Woyzeck*, holding a maquette in his hand like in a “presentation”, points out one-by-one which characters live in what part of the block. Meanwhile, the actors whom the protagonist is talking about appear in the windows on the side of the auditorium – making the spectator’s gaze jump from “wide angle shot” to an “extra wide” one. The scenes follow each other in a fast rhythm from the beginning to the end, moving into a completely different tonal environment without transition, as if someone was continuously switching the TV remote controller from one channel to another. At the end of the performance the stage goes dark, only the maquette is lit by a pulsing red light. All this is not a mere self-purpose formal game because it actually is close to the dramaturgy of the original



Photos: Zsolt Eöri Szabó



work: the scenes of the fragmentary drama also do follow each other in a film-like manner and, according to Péter Balassa, they are not even autonomous units.¹⁵

As it is known, Büchner's drama is left fragmented in four versions. At the same time, as Peter Balassa writes, "fragmentariness is the *characteristic feature* of this drama – it is not its *disability*". That is the reason why "this drama does not have, for it could not have its real performance tradition. Because this language represents a world state which is to be interpreted, to be played on stage as a permanent *Now*, the signs as linguistic signs are the signs of the prevailing times, and they become decipherment, they become keys by reinterpretation, by the re-energizing presence again."¹⁶ Furthermore, it is an important fact that Büchner wrote the play on the basis of actual cases. First and foremost, from the story of a man called Woyzeck in reality, whose case had been the subject of a detailed expert opinion from the Chief Medical Officer of Leipzig and from a medical expert, based on which Woyzeck was executed before 5,000 people. He also used the so-called Schmolling Documents: Daniel Schmolling was a tobacco roller cigarette craftsman who killed his lover.

The four versions of the Woyzeck drama show us four different *sujet*. As we know, the *fable* is the series of events that come together in the head of the viewer after viewing/reading the piece.¹⁷ The processing of the work is made

¹⁵ Péter Balassa: "Mint egy nyitott borotva..." [= "Like an Open Razor..."] In.: Szenárium 2018. March, p. 64.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁷ Here we should draw the attention to the concept of the *fable* and the *sujet* of Russian formalists (used in narratology even today). "The *fabula* (...) is a pattern created by the recipient through assumptions and conclusions: it is the outcome of growing bands resulting from the reception of narrative signals, from the use of schemas, from creating and controlling hypotheses. In an ideal case, the *fable*, depending on the circumstances, is displayed in a general or detailed verbal synopsis. (...) The *sujet* is a system that organizes the components – the events of the story and that of the facts – according to specific principles. As Boris Tomasevsky puts it: 'The *fable*

difficult, among others, by the fact that the four *sujets* do not “contain” the same fable. For example, the murder is included in the first version only. The fable of the piece *could* be what the doctor-expert in Leipzig described: “After returning to Leipzig in December 1818, (Woyzeck) lived in the following places in time sequence, worked in the following positions, and according to his own account, the following things happened to him: (...)”.¹⁸ And here follows a list. But Büchner did not aspire for exact reconstruction. He considered the court records as a starting point, selected parts and motifs from them, and – especially in the part called “murder complex” – even used Schmolling’s testimony of how he struggled killing his lover. It is of particular interest that the story, reconstructed by a forensic expert, does *not* include any doctor who has an important dramaturgic function in all four versions. My assumption is that The Doctor who wrote the expert opinion in the piece was “invented” by Büchner.

It is not exaggeration to say that the Stalker Group handled Büchner’s text as freely as Büchner himself handled the original documents. At times, the parodistic, TV-show-like episodes are directly related to the world of action, and they are separated from it at other times. Even the *sujet* does not display the events of the fable linearly. In the first third of the performance the Doctor – as a piece of news from a newspaper – reads along the court judgment (which is an abbreviated, updated version of the medical opinion), that is, we are aware of the murder well before its occurrence. Relationships between actors are roughly mapped out by Büchner’s scheme, and longer scenes and parts of text (eg. shaving The Captain, dialogue of Woyzeck and The Doctor, the tale of the poor child, dialogues by Andres and Woyzeck, monologue of the Journeymen) in one way or another (updated, expanded with improvisations) are released. Most of the performance time, however, is made up of TV program parodies (which are sometimes interwoven by the story of Woyzeck) and of dancing scenes, the latter being, of course, mostly comparable to the scenes in the pub. In the performance, both versions of the ends of the piece (according to the first and fourth drafts) appear. At first, Woyzeck does not want to buy the knives. Then he says the final words of the fourth version (“Truly, Andres, when the carpenter (...)”¹⁹

– although it is made up of the same events – is opposed to the *sujet*: it always takes into consideration the order of events established in the art piece and the series of informational processes designating them.’ The *sujet* (...) is a set of signals that induce us to extrapolate and collect the storyline information.” Bordwell, quoted work pp. 62–65.

¹⁸ Johann Christian Clarus: *Expertise on the credibility of Johann Christian Woyzeck, a murderer, based on the principles of court records and forensic medicine*. In: Mátyás Domonkos (ed.): *Georg Büchner összes művei*. Bp., Osiris Kiadó, 2003. p. 286. Georg Büchner: *Gesammelte Werke*. Goldmann Verlag, Klassiker Bd. 1978. English edition: Georg Büchner: *The Complete Plays and Prose*. Verlag Mermaid Dramabook 1963.

¹⁹ Text missing from Büchner’s manuscript (ed.)



Georg Büchner: *Woyzeck*, National Theatre, Budapest, 2018, d: Attila Vidnyánszky Jr. (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)

the woodchips, no one knows whose head will rest on it.”). And in the end, like in the first variant, he stabs Marie – however, after the Showman’s speech (which again is not an exact quotation – “From monkey became a soldier, from soldier became a murderer”; in the original it is only “from monkey became a soldier”) and the first curtain call of the actors Marie gets out of the tub and dances with Woyzeck, leaving the possibility that all this was just imagination.

According to Miklós H. Vecsei, who wrote the textbook, the Stalker Group asks these questions by the performance: “Can Woyzeck be called guilty? Or is the world itself guilty which gives birth to murderers?” At the beginning of the piece, the actor playing The Doctor turns towards the auditorium and tries to explain that we are going to see an attempt to answer this question. But he fails: either he is interrupted or he interrupts himself, taking on new and new roles. Could it not be possible to ask this question? Leastways, the players congratulate Woyzeck after the murder...

The transtextual elements appearing in the performance can also be interpreted as a manifestation of Woyzeck’s madness, a kind of “mental journey”, or, since the Showman, the circus stunts, the puppet plays performed within the drama have an important role, the “deposit scenes” not closely related to the plot can be regarded as its special interpretation. However, I think the performance directed by Attila Vidnyánszky Jr. holds a curved mirror to the world state described by Baudrillard and Virilio:

“...The real problem, the one and only problem is: where has the Evil disappeared? To everywhere: the anamorphosis of the Evil forms of today is endless. In a society that has alwayed so much with prophylaxis, extinguishing its natural references, washing violence white, killing germs and all the elements of the cursed part, with negative plastic surgery, it only wants to work with predicted control and just want to hear about Good, in a society where it is no longer possible to pronounce the Evil, the Evil has put on all the viral and terrorist forms that is tempting us.”²⁰

Published in Hungarian: *Szenárium*, May 2018

Translated by István Pinczés

²⁰ Baudrillard, quoted work p. 73.



Theatre and History

On the 30th anniversary of the foundation of the theatre company in Beregszász/Berehove by Attila Vidnyánszky

Berehove is a Hungarian city with a long history in Transcarpathia, Ukraine, seat of the Berehove District. It has the largest Hungarian community in Transcarpathia and is a major Hungarian cultural centre.

However, the proportion of Hungarian speaking natives has declined significantly over the 20th century: while in 1910, 12 432 of Berehove's 12 933 inhabitants were Hungarian, the 2001 census showed that only 12 800 of the city's 26 600 inhabitants are Hungarian, and 10 300 native Ukrainians.

Under the Trianon peace treaty of 1920, which ended the First World War, the victorious Entente gave two-thirds of Hungary's territory to neighbouring countries. This was when Berehove became part of Czechoslovakia. It was stripped of its municipal status and its self-government was suspended.

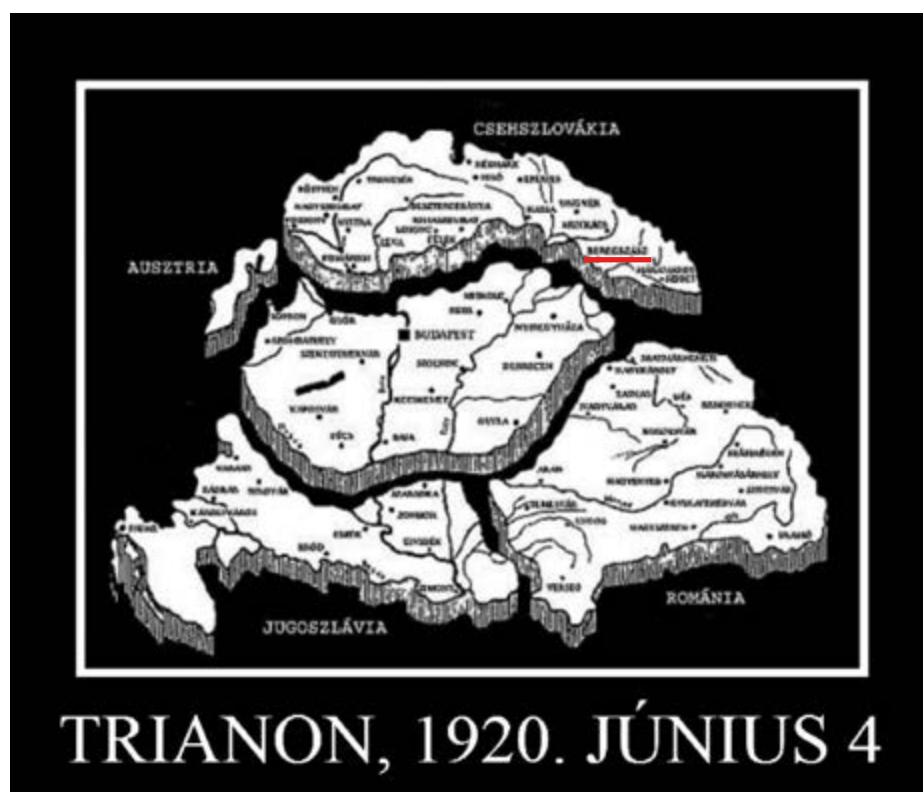
Among the annexed territories, the most adverse fate befell Transcarpathia. The territory belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary from the conquest until 1920, after which it changed hands five times. From 1920 to 1938 it belonged to Czechoslovakia, then in 1938 it returned to Hungary together with Upper Hungary. In 1944 it once again became part of Czechoslovakia for a year and was then "liberated" by the Soviet Union in 1945.

After 1918, the situation of Hungarian language acting in Transcarpathia was highly unfavourable. The greatest difficulty was caused by the fact that the Hungarian theatre company worked under bleak economic conditions. Acting in Transcarpathia could only rely on two major cities – Ungvár/Uzhhorod and Munkács/Mukachevo –, while other smaller towns (Berehove, Nagyszőlős/Vynohadriv, Huszt/Khust, etc.) could not even cover the overheads of a medium-sized theatre company. However, even the aforementioned two larger cities treated Hungarian companies less favourably than, for example, Bratislava and Kassa/Kosice, with their centuries-old theatrical tradition, where Hungarian acting survived even between the two world wars.

Nonetheless, what had not been achieved in Munkács or Ungvár during the turbulent decades of the 20th century was accomplished in 1993 in Berehove: on 23rd October, the first permanent professional Hungarian theatre in Transcarpathia, the Gyula Illyés Hungarian National Theatre, opened its doors under the leadership of Attila Vidnyánszky. The first performance was *The Threepenny Opera* by Bertold Brecht (1993), followed by Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1994), T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1997), Madách's *The Tragedy of Man* (1998), Csokonai's *Dorottya* (1999), *The Boy Changed into a Stag* by Ferenc Juhász (2003), *The Tót Family* by Örkény István (2004), Ede Szigligeti's *Liliomfi* (2007), and others, demonstrating the will of Hungarian theatre to live.

*Based on Géza Balogh's writing**

Translated by Bálint Péter Tóth



Map of the territorial losses of historical Hungary in 1920 (source: szegedma.hu)

* Balogh, Géza: Nagy-Magyarország színházi fellelőggyérei Trianon előtt és után [Theatrical strongholds in Greater Hungary before and after Trianon] Part 3 (Vojvodina and Subcarpathia) In: *Szcenárium*, November 2019., pp 13 – 15.



Theatre of the Nation

Zsolt Szász Talks to Attila Vidnyánszky¹

– In interviews you often said that you had always been doing “national theatre”. What did you mean by that when you first founded a company in Beregszász, Kárpátalja, in the early 90s of the last century?

To tell the truth, I primarily wanted to do *theatre* in Beregszász and not Hungarian theatre. In retrospect I find it dismaying how vaguely I considered my relationship to my own community in this regard. I still needed the following three years’ stress tests. Direct encounter, or rather active coexistence, with the Hungarians of Kárpátalja, the village people, made me realize it for life that there is also a higher consideration in an artist’s life than the particular activity itself, doing theatre, and it is the decision of where you belong with respect to community and language. Commitment to a national identity may not be a major issue in the West, but it is one in our geographic region, as sadly evidenced by the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. In the light of this, the story of how our theatre in Beregszász got its name makes one start thinking rather than laughing, and well typifies “the misery of Eastern European small states”, as a great 20th century Hungarian thinker, István Bibó expressed it. In the autumn of 1992, during the disintegration of the Soviet Union, an interstate meeting took place in Beregszász with the participation of Ukrainian and Hungarian ministers of culture as well as prominent members of the already existing Illyés Foundation in order to guarantee bi-lateral financial support for the newly-formed theatre. This story also exemplifies how the symbolic contents so frequently associated with the nation and national dramatic art may transform the world once they are represented by a genuine theatre artist, namely a great Hungarian actor.

We are ready for dinner in Nagybereg, in the company of Mrs Horolecz, the ex-actress minister of culture, and Bertalan Andrásfalvy, then minister of culture in

¹ See the full interview: *Szcenárium*, March–April 2015. pp. 15–22.



The former Lion Hotel, the building of the Illyés Gyula Hungarian National Theatre in 2018 (photo: Zsolt Eőri Szabó, source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)

Hungary. A lot of alcohol has been consumed during the strenuous negotiations all day. At one point Andrásfalvy starts singing. First, the Hungarian side sings the folk song *A csitári hegyek alatt*. It is followed by an alternate succession of Ukrainian and Hungarian folk songs. Embarrassed as I am, I try to join this side, then that, in order to set a convivial mood. And when it has become really most convivial, Imre Sinkovits, Actor of the Nation², jumps from his seat and

says: “*Let the Hungarian theatre be called Gyula Illyés*”. They translate “*nas poet*”, a great Hungarian poet. – “*Hurrah! Hurrah! All is well, let it be Gyula Illyés.*” The time of about a pint passes again, Sinkovits rises anew and asks: “*Is there another Hungarian theatre in Kárpátalja?*” – A tricky question indeed, of course there is not. “*Fine – says Sinkovits –, in that case let the name be Illyés Gyula Magyar Nemzeti Színház (Gyula Illyés Hungarian National Theatre).*” – It gets translated, and since neither the Ukrainian nor the Russian language makes a distinction between ‘*nemzeti*’ (‘*national*’) and ‘*nemzetiségi*’ (‘*ethnic*’), using “*nacionalnij*” for both, it will be accepted, too.

– *Did it get officially accepted then?*

This name never got officially accepted, but, up until very recently – until township maintenance was taken over by regional authorities and the Ukrainian language law³ adopted at the same time –, we were using the adjectives *Hungarian* and *national*, which gave us real backbone, strength of character, especially in the beginning.

– *Why did it seem necessary for the theatres considered worthy to be awarded a high-priority “national” status? Five towns with county rights operate institutions of a national status: Debrecen, Miskolc, Győr, Pécs and Szeged. What value preference does this adjective imply?*

The main intention of the liberal opposition camp was, as proven by the law in 2008 under the socialist rule, that the existing structure be made redundant.

² Imre Sinkovits (Kispest,[1] 21st September, 1928 – Budapest, 18th January, 2001) holder of the title Actor of the Nation, Kossuth Prize and twice Jászai Mari Award, Artist of Merit and of Excellence.

³ The language law in Ukraine was adopted in 2012.

The existence of resident companies at urban theatres was questioned because they wanted to place “project theatres” or occasional troupes in an advantageous position. They even toyed with the idea of dissolving independent companies in Kecskemét and Székesfehérvár or Eger and Nyíregyháza, arguing that these theatres used to be supplied with performances from Budapest or Debrecen. Serious studies were prepared on the topic by for example Máté Gáspár or Árpád Schilling. We were worried that if we yielded under this pressure, simply the increasingly fewer resources would lead to the introduction of a model like for instance in Scandinavia, Holland, or even France, where long-standing theatre workshops can be dissolved with a stroke of the pen. We had a fantastic infrastructure developed by the beginning of the 20th century, based on a German model, and most of our theatre buildings are declared national monuments, too. We trusted that politicians would not destroy them, either. However, we were aware that we, theatre people, would have to learn how to operate this infrastructure and fill it with up-to-date content. I find it exasperating that there is a new generation of directors which would not work within this structure and go sinking rather than swimming. Nowadays they are encouraged to do so even by the professors at the University of Theatre, unfortunately.

– *What sort of requirements does a theatre with national status have to meet?*

We wanted to promote lifelike things by this amendment. It puts forward genre diversity, and the continuation of playing opera in the country for instance. It is prescribed that national theatres must have festivals. They must have a wide range of international partnerships, above all with Hungarian theatres across the border. Theatres in both categories⁴ are required to organize programmes for children and youth, too. Apparently, there are corrections to be made in the future, and we keep thinking what to alter in the amendment because it is full of imprecision. For example, an actor career path model must be created in the near future. We insist that theatres adhere to the new outlines of community culture, a major element of which is to resurrect theatre in the five hundred-odd community centers which have been renovated through EU funding. In order to do that it would be essential for theatre professionals to support school and amateur dramatics – either by supplying newly forming groups with mentors or

⁴ According to the 2011 Act, theatres fall into three categories. The former six categories have been reduced to three new categories of normative support: national, priority (both eligible for normative support) and “project”, which means having to apply for grants every year anew. Those in the category of “national” are maintained by the state or by the ensemble provided it is state-contracted and at least 70% of its members hold special higher-level qualifications or such as stipulated by the Public Service Act. An organization may be of “priority” if it is financed by a local government and at least 60% of its members hold the stipulated or special higher-level qualifications. As for classification criteria, a certain number of stage appearances are also determined by the Act for particular art forms, and adding contemporary works to the repertoire is now taken into consideration within each category.

by taking performances to these otherwise technically well-equipped institutions. We would like to realize at last what has only been a slogan so far: let each schoolchild visit a theatre at least once a year. So there is a lot to do in the near future. Still, I am quite proud of carrying through this amendment as it is.

They are quite right in involving us as we are highly important components in cultural life. The Nemzeti Színház for instance has an annual attendance of hundreds of thousands, but smaller companies also attract crowds of viewers. Contrary to what is often said, there is no ideological pressure on us. Just the legal regulations. Even those determine nothing but the minimum with regard to the ratio of graduates as well as the number of premieres and presentations. It may not be known either that 99% of Hungarian theatres exceed the required minimum significantly.

– Did you need to rethink your vision after becoming the director of the Nemzeti Színház? Could it possibly be not the Act alone but also the place, status and social role of the theatre which are in urgent need of redefinition?

Unfortunately, it sounds banal today that theatre, including the Nemzeti Színház, has been continuously losing its former – unique – prestige. It is commonly and basically blamed on the emergence of new media, especially television and the internet. To this I would add that in Hungary the attenuation of middle class values and mentality, which, one way or other, defined theatre-going habits even in the single-party era, might have contributed to this erosion. During the past twenty-five years, as a subsequent consequence of ever-deepening crisis phenomena, the attitude which looked upon the ideas of patriotism and national attachment as middle-class virtues was just about being phased out. And so was the longstanding practice of satisfying the community's desire for a festival first and foremost by going to the theatre. From this respect, theatre is presumably the most sensitive of arts: it is born in a moment and evaporates in another, therefore its place and status needs continual redefinition. We, Hungarians may not be quite aware of how much we insist on our theatre. Once I had a director from Bulgaria visiting and he asked me the number of supported theaters in Budapest. His jaw dropped open when he was told. There are 24 in Budapest and a hundred-odd studio theatres as well. These figures beat everyone in the vicinity and we could be proud of it. Even Bukarest has only a fraction of that. Also, the social role of theatre needs redefinition if only on account of a shift in the cult of the actor, the central factor in theatre ethos. A shift at least with us. Since the colleague from Bulgaria I mentioned earlier said that the way spectators throw bouquets of flowers onto the stage after a performance, and actors take them apart, and throw them back to the audience, amounts to an all-embracing national show there. They have a more active stage and auditorium, actor and audience relationship. And they still preserve the general habit of fans waiting for actors at the stage door, which we also used to have. Russia, too, has kept that habit to this very day.

– *After a multi-decade latency period, the question of national identity in Hungary has come into focus again. How would you explain that?*

As far as theatre is concerned, this issue has been on the agenda since the construction of the new Nemzeti Színház, that is to say since 2002. And it gained new momentum when I replaced Róbert Alföldi as head of the Nemzeti Színház at the turn of 2012/13. We might as well say that the theatre profession has been positioning itself brilliantly over the last ten years because such matches in Hungary traditionally take place in literature. The fact that the Nemzeti Színház had always been in the focus of attention not only as an institution but a building as well was eminently proved by the manner in which the building of the old Nemzeti in the centre of the city was physically destroyed in 1965, with the plot being devised to fall on 15th March, our national holiday. It was obvious to everyone that it was part of the retaliation for '56.

– *June 2013 also saw the publication of a bulky collection of essays by Zoltán Imre, entitled A nemzet színpadra állításai (The Stagings of the Nation).⁵ The author's concept is based on the idea that the Nemzeti Színház serves to represent those in power, which is an obstacle to artistic liberty. He is trying to persuade the reader that the ideal which triggered off the establishment of this institution – that is the ideal of a speech community-based nation-state – was already anachronistic during the so-called Age of Reform, in the first third of the 19th century. He is of the opinion that by creating the Pesti Magyar Színház (Pest Hungarian Theatre), the Hungarians suppressed the German-speaking – then – majority in the capital.*

Appealing as it is, Zoltán Imre has, to my knowledge, never been concerned about ethnic minority theatres. Their support has been stabilized at the initiative of the Teátrumi Társaság. As for the Age of Reform, I would still ask the question about the reason for the presence of a German-speaking majority in the capital of Hungary. It is common knowledge that it was the consequence of the 150 years' Turkish subjection, the subsequent settling of Germans and Vienna's Germanizing policy. The language-based reform movement was Hungarians' response to that, and rightly so. If Zoltán Imre means to say that ethnic minorities are to be taken care of, I agree with him entirely. Each nation has a natural right to self-assertion, respecting that of all other nations, too. I, for example, can feel overwhelmed by enthusiasm for the culture, customs, gastronomy and sports achievements of other nations. As an ethnic Hungarian, I know it only too well that whenever politicians start playing the ethnicity card – like in World Wars I and II or just now – they want to have something covered. Apparently, Zoltán Imre is at least as much aware of that as I am.

⁵ Imre, Zoltán: *A nemzet színpadra állításai (The Stagings of the Nation)*. A magyar nemzeti színház-elképzelés változásának főbb momentumai 1837-től napjainkig (Changes in the Concept of the Hungarian National Theatre from 1837 to Our Day), Ráció Kiadó, Budapest, 2013.

A nation wishing to assert itself, and having attained a cultural level of being able to do so through theatre, will naturally create the institution of a national theatre. It is absolutely inevitable and almost each nation in Europe has done so. Some did so earlier, some later. It was not long ago that Macedonia did so for instance, since the country as an independent nation state is only a recent arrival. We may be proud of our theatre founded in 1837 and, at the same time, admire the Polish people for their 250-year-old national theatre. As far as present time Europe is concerned, I still do not know a better alternative than thinking in terms of a nation and the framework of nation states, including national institutions, with the Nemzeti Színház among them.

Translated by Nóra Durkó



The original façade of the National Theatre (formerly the Hungarian Theatre of Pest) in 1840 (source: *Utazás Pestről Budapestre*, Pallas, 1909)



The building of the Népszínház (People's Theatre) in 1875, pictured on a postcard around 1900. It served as the home of the National Theatre between 1908 and 1965



The demolition of the building in 1965



The new building of the National Theatre, 2002, designed by Mária Siklós



Theatre by the Danube (source: www.panoramio.com)



GABRIELLA LŐRINCZ P.

Theatre and Audience



We often encounter the word “theatre-making” nowadays, and on reflection, this rather unsophisticated expression applies to something for which we haven’t come up with a better phrase. Whenever I think of the Gyula Illyés Hungarian National Theatre in Berehove, that is what I consider genuine theatre-making.

Cultural life in Transcarpathia has almost always been rather precarious, with cultural hubs like Kosice, Bratislava, Cluj-Napoca or Budapest far away. If we consider the numerous talented artists who were born in Transcarpathia, we can see that they rose to prominence elsewhere. Nonetheless, this tiny place, oftentimes afflicted throughout history, which changed hands on several occasions, was where a truly unique theatre sprung up. We like to consider every theatre special and every beginning difficult, but in Berehove the situation was even more complicated than usual when Attila Vidnyánszky and a handful of enthusiastic, budding actors started from scratch and set off on an untrodden path in 1993.

The break-up of the Soviet Union was a huge blow for ordinary people living in Transcarpathia, as their possessions lost their value, their jobs disappeared, and their future became uncertain overnight. Of course, there was hope for a better, freer world, but anybody left without a livelihood is rarely in dire need of culture. It was not the first time such events took place in the lives of Transcarpathian people, having survived the Tatar invasion of the 13th century, the series of annexations over the course of the 20th century, forced labour introduced by the Soviets, and they were no strangers to the redrawing of borders. As my grandmother used to say: “Well, we’ve never been Ukrainians before.” It was in this derelict and troubled place that Vidnyánszky wanted to create a theatre, and it was in fact this determination and defiance that brought him and the Hungarians of Transcarpathia the future we can now call the present, when we can say that our theatre is already thirty years old. For this is truly our theatre, the theatre of all Transcarpathian Hungarians.

It can be said that the theatre company already existed spiritually, but it did not yet have a place of its own. The way the theatre of Berehove was created

was similar to that of the early Christian church. Imagine that there is nowhere to rehearse, or if there is, there is no heating. There is no water, as was often the case in our homes, no electricity, since there is a power cut at least twice a day, and no pay. (Let us briefly enter and explore this room of no-s: it is dark, cold and miserable. Then get out quickly, because if you stay too long, you perish.) The original team became a travelling troupe performing in schools, libraries and on the lakeside. Probably neither they nor Vidnyánszky knew what they were doing. This was far from a deliberate cultural mission, intentionally trying to forge the unity of Transcarpathian Hungarians, they were only making theatre. Wholeheartedly. Always bearing in mind their existence as an ethnic minority group. This was never a problem, and it never occurred to anyone that a Hungarian company from Transcarpathia would get involved in political skirmishes. When I recall Csokonai's *Karnyóné* ("Mrs Karnyó") (2002), *The Falcon Feast* based on Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1995), Chekhov's *One-act Comedies* (1997), I think not only of the plays and the performances, but the work that went into staging them.

I got into close relationship with the theatre of Berehovo twenty years ago, when I first saw for myself what went on behind the scenes in this magical world. Witnessing how members of the company live and breathe together experiencing each other's good and bad days made me understand how a theatre can become a constructive and cohesive force. I have not experienced this intense togetherness in other theatres. Now, twenty years later and based on my own experience of building communities, I believe that this is the only way to build a team. In fact, if I could ever direct a play, I would have all company members move in together for a whole week to see each other as they are. In those days, actors didn't have side jobs and didn't carry their problems with themselves into the rehearsal room, for at last there was a rehearsal room and a stage! It was a sanctuary. At least, that's what I always felt, entering the theatre, walking down the stairs, sitting in the long corridor, that whenever there was a performance in the evening, the whole building was like a temple. Although I knew all the actors, they somehow grew into something larger than life as they entered the stage and became kings, knights, beggars or priests. And I believed them; I still do today.

Maybe it was the difficult start, all the travelling, the challenges of being torn from the motherland, or maybe each of these factors together that taught the company of Berehove such humility I have yet to experience elsewhere. I discovered it in the voice and look of great actors of old. I believe that there is a time for everything, and this is how I see the formation of the Berehove theatre. For then, thirty years ago, the troubled and desperate people of Transcarpathia needed something to hold on to. While being together, unwinding, crying, laughing or being taken aback, they slowly formed into an audience. In the beginning, when the theatre came to them, they learned how to manage their lives, so they had time for the performance. Then they realised this was good

and essential for their souls, and they would go to the theatre. They organised the journey, which also strengthened their sense of togetherness, as they could discuss what they had seen on the way home. (In Transcarpathia, no such thing as properly functioning public transport really exists.) Eventually it was their own acquaintances who took to the stage, as more and more talented young actors joined the company. Former child actors gradually grew up, and those who had once been carried around by their “elders” became established actors in their own right. The audience saw that their neighbour – their own kin – was performing, his or her name printed in the newspaper or on posters, which was a big deal for a small village in Transcarpathia. And even more importantly: they were performing in Hungarian.

The following generation grew into a theatre-going, appreciative and open-minded audience. It was interesting to see that they arrived in their finery, dressed for the occasion, never in sweats or T-shirts. I suspect others also sensed that each performance is different from all other encounters and showed their respect towards the artists. During the shows, I never heard any whispering or talking, as the company always held the audience spellbound. Not only were the actors fully present in their roles, but also the entire audience. After each performance, the latter gave a standing ovation, often making their beloved actors return six or seven times to take a bow. We felt that the price of the ticket was not enough and had to show our gratitude. Sometimes, during the roaring applause, those in the stalls cried together with those on the stage. The theatre in Berehove played for everyone addressing teachers, politicians, labourers and bricklayers with each and every performance. I saw how the actors looked out for each other when someone was playing injured, but also witnessed their mutual teasing.

Attila Vidnyánszky was courageous enough to be modern, outspoken and provocative in this isolated community. While he didn't know how audiences would react, he believed in what he was doing, his actors believed in him, and eventually they began to believe in themselves. After the Soviet era, the world opened up: not only did theatre come to life, but buds sprang up in all branches of culture. Writers, painters, musicians and, not least, the church flourished. Over time this gradual awakening led to the cooperation of everyone involved in culture. While congregations went to theatre together, actors recited poems written by contemporary Transcarpathian poets at the opening of exhibitions and local musicians played music. It was wonderful. Until the Ukrainian government decided in 2017 that the use of minority languages should be restricted. Then came COVID, the war, and everything changed, but I leave the telling of that part of the story to someone else...

August 2023

Translated by Bálint Péter Tóth



ISTVÁN KORNYA

Theatre on the Run

The most recent history and current state of the Berehove company

They want to go home. This is what members of the company of the Hungarian Theatre of Berehove keep saying. They have no idea what the future might hold, but that is their plan. They have been in Budapest since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. They perform at the National Theatre and are also invited elsewhere. They have started rehearsals for a new production, which helps them keep afloat.



From left: Attila Ferenci, László Tóth, Nelli Szűcs, Zsolt Trill, with their backs to the camera: Natália Gál and the author, István Kornya (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetisinhaz.hu)

“I don’t want to buy a monthly pass,” says Attila Ferenci, member of the Gyula Illyés Hungarian National Theatre in Berehove, or the Hungarian Drama Theatre of Transcarpathia, as it is officially called. We meet each other on the tenth day of the war, at the National Theatre in Budapest before their performance of *Tóték* (“The Tót Family”). His wife is a teacher and is currently at home with their children, and he is hoping to return home as soon as possible. Anyone I talk to from the company expresses the same desire. Their elderly parents, relatives, spouses, kids, home and work are all back there.

This is how the company has functioned for the past thirty years: when they are not performing in Berehove, their hometown, they tour Transcarpathia or bring their shows to Hungary. They get up at dawn, travel by bus, rehearse and perform. Then get back onto the bus and head home during the night.

However, on 24th February 2022, everything changed.

That day they were heading for Tiszaújszász to perform István Örkény’s *Tóték* at the local community centre. They had already crossed the Ukrainian border when the news reached them: Russia had attacked Ukraine and a state of war had been declared. They decided not to turn back, but to do the show. Örkény’s play is about tyranny and the fate of those left vulnerable in a conflict; the people of Tiszaújszász could not have asked for a more timely play. During the performance, the actors in the wings were constantly on their phones reading the latest news in disbelief and horror. They decided to come to Budapest. A few days later, the National Theatre was due to host a production of *Tóték* anyway. Attila Vidnyánszky, director of the National Theatre, founder of the Berehove company and director of *Tóték*, immediately rearranged the programme for March, scheduling eight performances in all. Tickets sold out in no time.

Tóték, which has been running since 2004, features actors from home – those who work in Berehove – and the five who have been members of the National Theatre’s company since 2013. The former are now in Budapest waiting to see what happens, but there are also some actresses who only come over for the performances. Some have come with their families, others have left their spouse and children at home. They have been accommodated in two so-called actors’ residences, some are staying with relatives or friends. The women go home whenever they can, since they are allowed to cross the border. They visit their own



Scene from the production titled *Tóték* (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

and their colleagues' parents, spouses, children, help their colleagues who have stayed behind and are involved in taking care of refugees from the besieged eastern and central regions. As Transcarpathia is not yet a theatre of war, these people either linger or go on to Hungary.

The company was founded in Berehove while the Soviet Union still existed, but it began working properly in 1993 under the leadership of Attila Vidnyánszky in an already independent Ukraine. The first and then the second group of actors, who had studied in Kiev, worked in miserable conditions for years. Although they had a theatre building, it was impossible to perform and rehearse in it because of the leaking roof and the lack of heating. It was quite a big deal when they managed to get an old tin can with which to travel. They toured from Sweden to Georgia, from Moscow to Nancy, winning one of their first prizes at the festival of Sevastopol, a town that is often mentioned in the news nowadays. Later they went on to win awards at prestigious festivals such as the Golden Lion in Lemberg and Kontakt in Toruń, and recently had two of their productions selected for Ukraine's Best Performances Festival. For



"This is not theatre here now" – refugees on the small stage of the Beregszász / Berehovo Theatre (photo: Mátyás Szöllősi, source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)

the company's 25th anniversary, they were able to renovate the theatre building housed in the former Golden Lion Hotel in Berehove with the support of the Hungarian state.

"Members of the company have tried to create some form of viable living conditions for themselves. Although their salaries are ridiculously low – they are paid the Ukrainian minimum wage which equates to around 60 000 forints –, they all stand on several legs. Some of them farm, teach, perform at

weddings, work for the local TV and radio while still acting. After decades of poverty, they have finally been able to work in decent conditions for the past few years. All this is now lost. Or at least nothing will ever be the same. Not even close. No one knows what the future might bring. There is complete uncertainty," says Attila Vidnyánszky, describing their situation.

As a university student in Ungvár/Uzhhorod in the 1980s, Attila Vidnyánszky learned from a book entitled *History of Towns and Villages* that the Hungarian population of Transcarpathia was 170 000, which the local community had long claimed to be 200 000. The first wave of emigration coincided with the

collapse of the Soviet Union, when the economy, state administration and civil service of the newly independent Ukraine fell apart (and has not fully recovered since). Central policies of recent years have not been kind to members of the Hungarian minority either. One only has to refer to the so-called language bill, which severely restricts the use of minority languages (primarily directed against the Russian minority, but also affecting Hungarians), or the fact that Hungarian dual citizenship is not recognised by Kiev. Meanwhile, never has such support from the Hungarian government been given to Transcarpathia. Not only is the infrastructure of the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College in Berehove of European standard now, but the local Ukrainian population also benefits from the development of kindergartens, while churches also receive financial aid, and agricultural subsidies have given a boost to those who have chosen to stay in their homeland.

In Vidnyánszky's estimation, the Hungarian population of Transcarpathia may be around 100 000 today. Only half of Berehove's population of 24 000 is Hungarian, with the majority of the Roma population claiming to be Hungarian. According to the mayor, who spoke recently, a third of the population has already left the city.

"For many the war was the last straw. Even those who did not want to leave their homeland are now fleeing. War overrides everything. Today, many are planning to return. When? What will they find? What will Hungarians see in a month or a year? If I only consider the future of the theatre: who will they play for? Every effort should be made to strengthen the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia, but I think our fate is sealed. I can only hope this is not the case..."

"I went home yesterday. Berehove is full of strangers. I met almost no one I knew on the streets. It was the same city, yet entirely different. There are refugees even in the theatre, up to 20–25 people, mostly women and children," says Natália Gál matter-of-factly, but her voice is unsteady and hushed. Like all the other actresses, she commutes between Budapest and Berehove, visiting her children on her way, who are currently staying with their father in Nyíregyháza.

She has multiple part-time jobs teaching at the Berehove College, leading a drama class and is one of the founders of the Transcarpathian Mental Health Society. She says that besides all the help, it is very important for people back



Refugees: mother and son in the corridor of the Beregszász / Berehovo Theatre (photo: Mátyás Szöllősi, source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)



Natália Gál (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó,
source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)

home and refugees to have someone sit down and listen to them. She has visited people who do not want to leave, no matter what. Others have everything packed in case they do have to flee. In villages where many houses are already empty, neighbourhood watches have been organised to prevent looting. They all hope that Transcarpathia will not become a war zone and that the military conflict will end as soon as possible.

The performance of *Tóték* is about to start. Prior to the show, we meet with the actors in the theatre's buffet. Those who are not speaking are constantly checking their phones to see if there is a new post in one of their countless Facebook groups or an important message from home.

"We have to keep believing, but we are afraid that something will snap and then there will be no turning back. I am afraid the world will change, and for us the world is Transcarpathia," says Nelli Szűcs, who plays Tótné (Mrs Tót), fighting back her tears. "It hurts to say this, but it's better for my father. He was ill, poor thing, and died recently. He was born in 1945, when Transcarpathia belonged to Hungary, then came the Soviet era, then independent Ukraine

and now the war. We have our own way of saying farewell from the dead, taking them to be buried from their home following a vigil. And now he was locked up alone in the house. I rushed home to Tiszaújlak, because he had to be buried in an hour."



Nelli Szűcs (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó,
source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)

Zsolt Trill, who will soon take on the role of the Major, is bitter and angry that many oversimplify the complex issue of war. Who? Armchair politicians. When will someone say that what is happening now is also the "result"

of the past thirty years of Ukrainian politics? Why does the country have an enormous state debt, and why is there immense poverty and hopelessness? Many people forget, he adds, that the war did not start now: it has been

going on since 2014, when Crimea and the two eastern Ukrainian provinces were occupied.

“For those of us who don’t understand politics, it would be nice to hear some honest words. I am dumb and naïve, but why are European leaders not begging for peace and rather pouring oil on the fire?!” asks Trill indignantly. László Tóth, who plays Tót in Örkény’s play, takes over: “Recently a Hungarian conductor prevented the removal of Tchaikovsky, just because he happened to be Russian, from the programme in Sweden. There was another case when a Russian opera singer was replaced by a Ukrainian one. So let’s not play Chekhov either! Where will all this lead to?”

The actors say goodbye. The stage manager has already called them for the second time.

“Same as before,” replies Edina Sin, when I ask her what her job is now as the theatre’s director. What does this mean in time of war? The director speaks in practical terms: she coordinates interviews, trips home, the reception and use of donations.

The company has experienced various forms of solidarity. Both István Örkény’s widow and the company that brokered the copyrights have waived royalties, so all proceeds from the performance now go to the company. Orsolya Györkéné Gulyás, a Hungarian teacher from Tata, immediately started a fundraising campaign at the local Calvinist school and came to see *Tóték* with fifty of her students. Afterwards, they handed over their donations in person.

“It was not some extracurricular activity that included seeing and interpreting the play and the performance, but something more,” recalls the teacher, who says that her high school students did not really grasp the reality of the war when they had a chance to talk to the actors, but a few days later, when they welcomed the first Transcarpathian student to their school.

The company is grateful for any assistance and all financial donations, but they are not looking for help. They want to earn what they receive. They had big plans, but first the pandemic and then the outbreak of war in February 2022 meant the cancellation of the premiere of their latest production, Michael Frayn’s comedy *Noises Off*, despite having it ready for the spring, which is when they normally start going to schools with their classroom performances.

Currently everything is constantly changing.



The audience is gathering for the performance of *Tóték* at the National Theatre in Budapest (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)



“Continuous redesign is on the agenda” – Edina Sin with Attila Vidnyánszky at the first rehearsal of *A helység kalapácsa* (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhaz.hu)

“When we work, at least we feel useful, otherwise we are just mulling over our troubles,” explains Natália Gál. “If you let your mind run free, it becomes a playground for ideas,” Attila Ferenci quotes from *Tóték*. The two of them have already found work in the capital: their production entitled *Az égigérő fa* (“The Sky-High Tree”) has been invited to ten kindergartens through the House of Hungarian Heritage.

They have already toured the whole of Transcarpathia with their two-man show. They recall

that when they played in Császlóc, near Uzhhorod, one of the five Hungarian students in the school fell ill, so they only played for four kids. The life of a member of an ethnic minority in a nutshell.

“Any company exists as long as it can perform,” explains Vidnyánszky. “We have received offers that Hungarian companies would employ an actor from Berehove. It’s a noble gesture, but it would lead to the company breaking up. For now, they can only perform *Tóték*, because the sets for the other productions are still back home. They can bring the pieces over by car or bus, in several rounds, which will have to be done by the women, because they are the only ones who can cross the border.”

Attila Vidnyánszky had long been planning to stage a performance for his original company, which came to be realised due to the circumstances, and almost immediately began rehearsals for *The Hammer of the Village*. In order to have a new production that would give new impetus and contribute to their livelihood in the years to come. The production is scheduled to be ready by mid-April 2022, the “Petőfi 200” jubilee. Many other theatres have contacted the Berehove company offering a venue for their production.

In the meantime, they continue to work. Whenever possible, they perform. And wait to go home. They don’t want to buy a monthly pass.

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Translated by Bálint Péter Tóth



ISTVÁN BESSENYEI GEDŐ

Attila Vidnyánszky's Paradigmatic Production of *Three Sisters* in Berehove¹

Attila Vidnyánszky's productions basically consist of two types of performances: the relatively *faithful staging* largely abiding by the rules of text-based representation, on the one hand (though it should be noted that this approach is far from free of lyricism and symbolism), and the fundamentally *reconsidered, original interpretation* that rewrites and restructures the text, arranges the dramatic structure according to its own considerations, or relies on no dramatic text whatsoever, on the other. With regards to dramatic and dedramatized performances, it is the latter that consistently becomes more and more prominent and important, at least in the sense that, being more time and energy consuming undertakings, they are given special attention by the creative team, and above all by the director himself.

The turnaround

The decisive turning point was the production in question, Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, which premiered in 2006 in Berehove, but was later performed in several other venues (Zsámbék and the studio of the Csokonai Theatre in Debrecen). Not having seen all of Vidnyánszky's productions from those years, of course the possibility that his – for lack of a better expression – “post-dramatic turn” may have occurred earlier cannot be excluded. However, I am certain that there had not been such an unmistakable turn in such an emblematic performance before.

¹ This study is a part of the author's thesis, which was completed in June 2012 at the Hungarian Faculty of the University of Arts in Târgu Mureș, under the supervision of Dr. Ildikó Ungvári Zrínyi. For a longer version in Hungarian see Besenyei Gedő, István: “Halál, hol a te fullánkod?” Dedramatizáló törekvések Vidnyánszky Attila rendezéseiben (“Death, where is your sting?” Attempts at Dedramatization by Attila Vidnyánszky) parts 1-2, In: *Szcenáríum*, October 2013 (5–19), November 2013 (24–42).

Thus, if one is looking for a specific point of reference, it is probably this performance, since it bears almost all the unmistakable hallmarks of Vidnyánszky simultaneously.

In addition to some already employed methods, there is an element that marks the post-dramatic turn more than any other aspect of the performance: the restructuring of the dramatic text, in such a way that it ruins the final twist, the last remnant of the drama in crisis, as Peter Szondi put it², and thus does away with the “story” as such. In this performance, Vidnyánszky is not at all interested in the “events” or the “tale” (in the Aristotelian sense).

While even Chekhov makes it evident that the story is not important in his play, in a way everything has already been decided from the very first moment, and the plot moves in a predetermined, unchangeable direction, it still retains something of the dramatic storytelling despite the crisis of the drama. Although there is no definite conflict, dialogue or plot, the possibility of a “story” is still there, inasmuch as we do not know for sure at the beginning whether Andrei will become a university professor or whether the girls will make it to Moscow.



A. P. Chekhov: *Three Sisters* (2003), Zsámbék,
d: Attila Vidnyánszky (photo: Béla Ilovsky,
source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

Vidnyánszky eliminates the final twist by simply starting the performance with the third act, then continuing with the first, keeping the order of the acts (the second is followed by the fourth).

Right from the very beginning of the performance, the “stakes”, the “tension”, the involuntary curiosity towards stories, even if they are ones heard for the umpteenth time, are all lost. We are immediately confronted with the outcome: Andrei has not become a university professor, he is just an ordinary citizen proud to be a member of

the local council. He has married Natasha, who is cheating on him, and they have already had a child. The sisters never make it to Moscow and Kulygin never becomes a headmaster. The audience is taken back from this foregone situation to the beginning of the story with a forward-looking atmosphere, full of desire and a sense of hopefulness, in which anything is still possible. Andrei might become a university professor, Kulygin a headmaster, and the girls can perhaps return to Moscow. Only we know for sure that their dreams will never be realised.

² Szondi, Péter: *Theory of the Modern Drama*. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

From then on, the nature of the performance will be more important than the stakes of the story. Relationships and the way actions are performed (instead of their purpose or direction) become more significant. It is not the object of longing that is relevant, but the longing itself, just as it is not the story that is important, but the fact and the nature of the storytelling. From this point on, poetry, associative-figurative phrasing and musicality (including that of the text) are given free rein. A series of events take place in a crowded



A. P. Chekhov: *Three Sisters*, Zsámbék,
d: Attila Vidnyánszky (photo: Béla Illoszky,
source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

space, dominated by a symbolic window and rope (in reference to the story about Moscow told by Ferapont). Mythical aspects gain emphasis: Moscow becomes the inaccessibly distant place, the Promised Land that, similarly to Moses, the characters can never enter, but the story of the rope stretched over it (as an undecipherable mystery) also becomes significant.

This is how Vidnyánszky does away with the “crime story”. More precisely, he is an author who, in the opening lines, reveals the murderer, the victim, the person who catches the perpetrator, and how the latter will be punished for the crime. As a result, the “reader” is no longer held captive by the curiosity, the thrill and the excitement of the story. No longer can we wonder whether the culprit will be caught, whether we will find out who did it and how. Instead, it is the *how* that becomes important, both in case of the murder and the investigation; the nature (and quality) of the events, the motives and the relationships.

This approach is reminiscent of the analytic structure, yet it does not produce an analytic drama, since it focuses on the *how* rather than the *why*. What is interesting is not the reason why the characters got to where they are at the beginning of the performance (since it is obvious that they could not have got anywhere else), but their predestined state and futile hope. This brings to the fore the possible theological interpretation of *Three Sisters*, which is, nonetheless, deeply encoded in the text.

The group as community

Even if only briefly, I must refer to another important aspect, often recurring in Vidnyánszky’s later works: the idea of the group as community, the unique interpretation of the relationship between the individual and the group.



All the characters line up between Solyony's pistol and Tuzenbach
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

Similarly to his work as a company builder, he pays special attention to the community (of actors) in each performance. This group-interpretation can already be discovered in his earlier works, in the group movements and large-scale “line-ups” of *Dorottya* (2001) or *Tóték* (2004). However, there is an important distinction to be made between the performance in question and earlier cases: namely the fact that the dramatic text on which the staging is based (or rather, that serves as a pretext) not only does not require this kind of group interpretation, but does not even implicitly suggest it, in fact, would practically exclude it if taken literally.

To achieve this, the director uses an event that does not take place in front of the audience in the original play: the duel scene, which he simultaneously downplays. When the pistol appears, everything slows down. All the characters line up between Solyony's gun and Tuzenbach, preventing the killing. On the one hand, this is how Vidnyánszky expresses his criticism towards Chekhov's heroes, highlighting their lack of gumption and self-destructive helplessness (for this is one possible interpretation of the scene), since it shows exactly what the Chekhovian characters are unable to do, even out of love, fear or friendly sympathy, even though they know exactly – and even voice – what the outcome of the duel will be. One of them could have been enough to stand between the barrel and the baron waiting to be shot, as Vidnyánszky suggests, but instead they assist in the duel, with which they disagree.

In a sense, this scene takes place outside of the performance, and it remains somewhat undecided whether the actors in the line-up represent the community of characters, people (in the broader sense), or perhaps the actors (in a concrete and self-referential way).

The roles do not fully dissolve, but the associative nature of interpretation multiplies the number of possible meanings. The scene – by its very timing – seems to suspend the performance for a while, and, as if stepping outside of it, the actor's acting being (that is, his ludic, performing persona) is brought to the

forefront instead of the actor's role-self – in the sense that Măniuțiu uses this term when he speaks of the actors trifold being.³ In this sense, the actor's acting being is the “sacrificial body” of the actor, which exists between his real being and the role, and is created by the actor himself.

It is precisely a series of emblematic performances of the post-dramatic turn that show us: the acting being is not merely an intermediate step, and not only interesting in its functionality (necessitated by the role), but can also be shown in itself. For example, in the “civil” moments of Alain Platel's emblematic performance *Wolf* (2003), there is no real civil condition, but a (pseudo-)civility on stage. Interestingly, in this respect, even the animals (the dogs running around on stage) are such pseudo-civilian, actually out-of-character but on-stage creatures, since they are trained. Their behaviour is only apparently natural, as they know they cannot leave the stage until the end of the performance or rehearsal. They can only leave the stage after the performance, that is, they are only free within certain rules of the game. Of course, the animal is not an acting being in the strict sense of the word, in that it is incapable of consciously creating and perceiving the acting, yet it only exhibits pseudo-naturalism (what we see is that it is free to go anywhere, despite this not being the case).

The example of the tamed animals, no matter how distasteful it may be, is appropriate in that it highlights the difference between real and theatrical naturalism, even if in the case of the animal this difference is not presented by the acting being, the transubstantiated sacrificial body, but by the most instinctive fear of the tamer and the hope of reward. Theatrical naturalism and on-stage civility, often utilised by post-dramatic theatre, is never real naturalism. This applies to amateur acting as well, which post-dramatic theatre also likes to present on stage, mostly as a counterpoint to virtuosity, often showcasing the two simultaneously.

An amateur, however clumsy, is not a civilian on stage, he is simply not master of the tools at his disposal. If a random passer-by is called off the street and onto the stage to perform his customary daily actions, such as brushing his teeth, drinking coffee, preparing for his next class, and then leaving the stage to continue his daily routine, we can be quite sure that his behaviour will at best give the impression of being natural (if he is able to act skilfully), but in truth will not be natural. The brushing of his teeth and coffee drinking will be a demonstrated event, in front of spectators whose mere presence will force him to transform, and their reactions will make him react in return, according to the logic of the feedback loop.⁴ Thus, the actors' acting being can be removed from the representation, detached from the role, and performed or shown in itself.

³ Instead of the actor–role dichotomy, Măniuțiu proposes the actor–acting being–role triplicity. See Mihail, Măniuțiu: *Act(ing) and Mimesis. Essays on the Philosophy of the Actor*. Cluj-Napoca, 2019 (henceforth: *Act(ing) and Mimesis*) p14.

⁴ See Erika, Fischer-Lichte: *The Transformative Power of Performance – A New Aesthetics*. Routledge, 2008.

In the duel scene, it is precisely this in-between existence that comes to the fore (although I would rather speak of a double existence, in so far as the characteristic features of the characters do not disappear completely, but are rather relegated to the background). The actors do not primarily represent the character they portray, but a member of the community, nor do they behave according to the logic of the “character’s” personality. Kulygin would never be capable of standing in front of the gun in defence of a fellow human being – but the acting being of András Kacsúr, who plays him, would.



A. P. Chekhov: *Three Sisters*, d: Attila Vidnyánszky, featuring András Kacsúr and the duel scene
(photo: Béla Ilovsky, source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)

One can frequently encounter the putting on or shedding of a role and multiple meanings in Vidnyánszky’s later works. When the characters of the nativity play in *Halotti pompa* (“Splendour of Death”) (2009) step out of their roles, they return in the on-stage sacrificial body, onto which they can then don the roles symbolizing death, once they have taken the scythe in their hands (it should be noted, however, that such a role does not usually signify a “character” even after the actor has taken it on).

This in-between existence of Vidnyánszky’s actors is a recurring feature of the most outstanding works of poetic theatre. For example, Stalin in *Mesés férfiak szárnyakkal* (“Fabulous Men with Wings”) (2010) is not always Stalin. At times, he steps out of character and moves and acts on stage in a similar way to the other acting beings (while never removing his costume) – and this is evident despite the fact that Stalin is one of the few “stable points of reference” in the production.

This community, which first emerges in its unmistakable form in the duel scene of *Three Sisters*, carries incredible power: it can turn the universe on its head, overcome the author-god (in the sense of Derrida), the predestination

that stems from Chekhov's play, that is, it can step out of the impotence of the represented characters and redeem a person's life. Simply put, this community, of both actors and acting beings in a way that goes far beyond the characters, is able to overcome death.

What the numb and helpless author-god *did* not do, and the individual *could* not do, the community *can* do. It is not a hero, not a lonely Christ-figure who brings redemption and overcomes the power of cruel predestination (fate, moira): only the characters can rebel against their author, or more precisely the community of acting beings who reject the fate of the characters they represent, permitted (or instructed) to do so by the director as a creator who is also a rebel of his own kind. These rebellious acting beings, by protesting and taking a collective stand, in defiance of the representation of the predetermined, pre-written, unchangeable "text book" intention, shout (silently) at the author-god: *Death! Where is your sting? Hell! Where is your victory?*⁵

Their triumph is sweeping and overwhelming. It is the culmination of the dethronement of drama and the author, and puts an end to the pre-written fate and story of the characters – for we know that the acting being survives the given representation, even the eventual death of the character, and takes to the stage the following night in a new role. With regards to this "survival", it is worth noting that, according to Măniuțiu, the actor's acting being is best described by the paradox of "fullness in emptiness", and in this sense it is not an empty vessel but a set of roles.⁶

The actor's acting being carries with it a whole range of roles previously taken on and, in Grotowski's terms, also creates a score. Thus, the acting being of the actors in *Three Sisters* continues to carry the experience of triumph over death.

The redemption (mercy) granted by the community of acting beings to the doomed character, but also to each of the characters individually (since it frees them from the constraints of the Chekhovian fate), allows and also anticipates the final liberation. At the end of the performance, Vidnyánszky opens the huge window through which he provides his characters with an escape route.

Which one leaves through this window: the character or the acting being? Probably both (and this is what I mean when I say that the acting being redeems and liberates the character, while emphasising a continuous duality). The acting being rescues the Chekhovian hero from his Chekhovian fate, almost holding him in its arms, and the actor, even after leaving the stage, continues to wear his acting being.

The dethronement of the drama could not be more complete. After eliminating the (crime) "story" at the very beginning by ruining the final twist, and redeeming the characters from their fate (one of them from death itself),

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:55

⁶ *Act(ing) and Mimesis* p15

through the joint rebellion of the acting beings, Vidnyánszky finally frees them entirely, as if – to use the analogy of Tamás Koltai’s writing – he were opening the cage of his captive birds, releasing them, giving back their bodies to the sky.⁷

Only Natasha remains in the cage, caught between the stage and the character. The explanation for her confinement is twofold: on the one hand, and this is the more obvious explanation, she becomes a scapegoat (by virtue of the Chekhovian character) who must be damned for her evil and sins, and who can no longer be redeemed. On the other hand, and this explanation is closely related to the first one, she is the only one who did not stand in front of the gun at the moment of redemption. She missed the opportunity to strip off her role and become a member of the community, freeing herself from the power of authorial predestination.

Vidnyánszky, in rescuing his characters from Chekhov (and the author’s judgement), so to speak, also turns his back on representation and dismantles the structure of the drama. From this performance, the road leads straight to *The Splendour of Death* and *Fabulous Men with Wings*.

Translated by Bálint Péter Tóth



The cast of *Three Sisters* in Zsámbék during rehearsals in 2003
(photo: Béla Illovszky, source: szinhaz.net)

⁷ See Tamás, Koltai: A Debrecen-modell (“The Debrecen-model”) In: *Színház*, July 2009. Available: http://szinhaz.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=35290:a-debrecen-modell&catid=32:2009-julius&Itemid=7

"Don't rob me of my faith in art."

Imre Madách: The Tragedy of Man



NEMZETI SZÍNHÁZ
1837
A NEMZET SZÍNHÁZA

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“Words in theatre are ultimately spoken (be they previously written or coined in a moment of improvisation), and it is through the seductive, dramatic quality of the speech act that we encounter the theatre’s singular essence. In other words, it is not the content of an actor’s text, per se, but the formal quality of the speech act itself that inspires the audience. Thus, if we view theatre in terms of the relationship between actor and text, it follows that the theatre’s defining characteristic is revealed through the spontaneous sensations experienced in the actor’s speaking body, which in turn spawn an imaginative reincarnation of the rich linguistic heritage that dwells within the collective somatic unconscious of all human beings.” (*Tadashi Suzuki*)

“During Madách-projekt I was pleased to discover that this is by no means a passive, enervated generation. At the age of twenty, they too pose the eternal question that arises from their age: ‘Who am I?’ Just as Miklós Hubay expressed once in connection with Madách’s drama, they also prove that humanity still has ample reserves: »In biological terms, there is nothing wrong with humanity, the *élan vital* (‘life force’) would still propel it like an arrow from a taut, well-tuned bow«.” (*Attila Vidnyánszky*)

“The mask of tragedy is visage of Dionysos. He knows that a single poet is not enough for this face to be formed for ever in the mirror of the spirit. Many more are needed. (...) They are the ones who experience, affirm, accept, and proclaim the fullness of life, feeling for everything, dying a thousand deaths, beyond all morals which new gods impose on their followers. They are the ones who are infinitely free, and therefore their ecstasy is not self-loss like in the lives of those enslaved by power, possession, or drugs, because stepping out of themselves they do not enter the isolated and lonely realms of ecstasy, but the sacred clearing of the orgy: they find each other.” (*Attila Végh*)

“This community, which first emerges in its unmistakable form in *Three Sisters*, directed by Attila Vidnyánszky in Beregszász, 2006, in the duel scene of *Three Sisters*, carries incredible power: it can turn the universe on its head, overcome the author-god (in the sense of Derrida), the predestination that stems from Chekhov’s play, that is, it can step out of the impotence of the represented characters and redeem a person’s life. Simply put, this community, of both actors and stage selves in a way that goes far beyond the characters, is able to overcome death.” (*István Bessenyei Gedő*)

